

SAGE Research Methods Cases

Visual Methodologies: Participatory Potential, Practicalities, De- Familiarisation and Dissemination

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- Mannay, D. (in press). *'Who put that on there ... why why why?': Exploring the power games that remain in play when we apply participatory techniques of visual data production. Visual Studies.*
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The use of visual methods in social science research has become popular, and creative techniques are widely recognised as having the potential to evoke more nuanced understanding of the ways in which other people experience their worlds. This 'methods in action' case focuses on the visual data production techniques of photo-elicitation, mapping and collage making, and examines four key areas. First, the case engages with debates around the participatory potential of visual data production and complicates the idea that visual methods are necessarily participatory. Second, practicalities are considered in relation to working with visual data in the field. Third, the case explores the idea of familiarity by introducing data examples where visual methods

are employed to disrupt and question the taken-for-granted assumptions held by both researcher and participant. Fourth, the challenges of disseminating research findings without losing the creativity of the data is discussed, with reference to alternative forms of presentation.

Learning Outcomes

- To compile a list of potential strengths and weaknesses of visual methods of data production as a tool of qualitative inquiry
- To create a visual artefact as a research participant
- To apply the concept of de-familiarisation and imagined audience when evaluating the created visual data artefact
- To analyse a sample of visual data created by someone else and explore the meanings of images in a discussion format with the creator of the visual data
- To explain the ethical issues inherent to the dissemination of visual images

SAGE Cases in Methodology (SCiM) – Methods in Action

Methods in Action Case Background

The data explored in the study are taken from the research study 'Mothers and Daughters on the Margins: Gender, Generation and Education', which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The project employed visual (taking photographs, drawing maps and making collages) and narrative methods of data production to explore the everyday experiences of mothers and daughters, residing in a marginalised housing area in urban South Wales, United Kingdom. All of the visual and narrative data production activities were followed with an elicitation interview in which participants discussed their reasons for creating and selecting particular images and textual forms. The research focused on the importance of locality and the ways in

which the experience of the immediate culture, and also memories of the past, mediate participants' educational and employment histories and futures.

Exercise 1

When considering applying a method of data production, it is both useful and ethical to trial the method on yourself first. This allows you to explore the practicalities and potential difficulties with the method, and also by piloting the technique, you are then asking participants to engage in an activity that you were prepared to undertake. For this reason, draw a sketch of a room in your home and map out the items that hold the most importance to you. Do not be too concerned with artistic ability; you can provide name labels for items if this helps.

Participatory Potential

One principal objective of participatory research is to eliminate the conceptual and practical filters applied both literally and metaphorically by researchers, such as their preconceptions about a research area, and to engender access to the authentic views of participants. The rise in the use of visual methods in social science research has been accompanied by a discourse that suggests there is an easy marriage between the visual and the participatory; however, this position has been challenged by a number of researchers. For example, social science researchers Wendy Lutrell and Richard Chalfen comment that the explosion of participatory media projects has not resolved the goal of 'giving voice' and that a recurring and unresolved issue for researchers is that of whose voice is being spoken and simultaneously whose voice is being heard, particularly when research participants are children.

Participatory practice is very much about providing opportunities for participants to have control in research. In terms of data production, you could argue that the participants have control because they select what will be included in their drawings, maps, collages or photographs. However, reflecting on Exercise 1, although you chose what to include, there was a guide with instructions around the required topic of the picture. In this way, there is some form of assignment in participatory work; although perhaps you were

primarily concerned with constructing your own visual production, in terms of ownership, there was, of course, an element of guidance.

In my own work, I have explored power relations beyond the researcher and participant dyad. Asking participants to create visual data in their own home was a strategy to reduce the influence of the researcher so that data could be produced without this intrusive presence. However, when the researcher steps out of the site of research production, there are other people who can step in, and their presence will alter the power dynamics of the research. For example, as shown in [Figure 1](#), when I asked 9-year-old participant, Bryony, to draw a thematic map of her home, she created a picture with visual features that would be expected in terms of her age.

Figure 1. Bryony's home.

However, as the data were collected in stages, I later asked Bryony to make other images; this time, she returned a set of glossy, computer-generated images, text and photographs in the form of a collage. These images were created with the assistance of an adult; when Bryony and I discussed the collage in an elicitation interview, it was clear that Bryony did not have the level of ownership or engagement with the images as she had in her initial interview around the image in [Figure 1](#). Bryony said that she had not selected some of the images using the expression, 'Who put that on there ... why why why?', which suggests that the visual data production gave voice not only to Bryony, but rather the output was influenced by both Bryony and the weight of outside adult intervention. If we are interested in family life, then this is not necessarily problematic, but it demonstrates the ways in which we need to expect, embrace and evaluate competing influences on our participants' visual productions rather than simply accept them as reflecting participants' voices, particularly when our participants are children or other marginalised groups.

Exercise 2

It is also important to think about unseen and imagined audiences. For example, when producing visual data, we may deliberately leave out images that we do not want the researcher or significant others to view. In this way, the voice of the participant can be concealed as wider social norms, values and the expectations of others are a continuing, pervasive and constant influence. Reflecting on this point, return to your own drawing of a room in your home and think about what you have produced. Was the drawing produced with a specific, imagined audience in mind and did this restrict your inclusion of particular items?

Practicalities

A fundamental problem of employing participatory visual methods is the enormous amount of time that such activities take to complete. In a traditional interview method, the researcher sets a date, arranges a convenient time, and the fieldwork is complete. However, when you have asked participants to produce visual data prior to interview, a meeting cannot take place until they have completed this stage of the project. This can be frustrating when there is a deadline to meet. So it is something that needs to be considered carefully at the research design stage of a project.

For some participants, the delay in response can be due to an initial aversion to the method of data collection. For other participants, there may be delays because the project has to fit in with their busy work schedule and social life. Participants, then, may not want research to impinge on their time, as time, after all, is a precious resource. This brings up issues of when and how often to remind participants about the project when aspiring to a participatory research relationship and also the point that visual methods of data production may not be suitable for everyone.

The relative success of visual data production techniques with the majority of participants in a project can have a negative impact in that they act to blind the researcher to other techniques, which may be more suitable for some of the research sample. It is important to have a range of options, rather than dictating data production

techniques if research is going to be participatory. Therefore, if participants are not engaging in the visual data production, it is important to offer an alternative. Providing only visual techniques can be prescriptive, and the research then carries the subliminal message 'You will do my participatory method'. Therefore, it is important to offer some more flexibility in the research approach and as well as offering a range of visual production options, also providing the opportunity to just take part in an interview, or to offer any ideas of their own that could be incorporated into the study.

Fighting Familiarity

Sarah Delamont and Paul Atkinson have written extensively about the problem of familiarity and the way in which our personal experiences of fields of research, such as the classroom, can eclipse our ability to be able to 'see what is there' and conduct useful social science research. In qualitative research, the concept of making the familiar strange and strategies to 'fight familiarity' can be taken on board as an attempt to limit the propensity for participants' accounts to become overshadowed by assumptions and preconceptions. Drawings and photographs have been used successfully to render the familiar setting more perceptible and provide different ways of knowing and understanding, in this way counteracting the problem of the researcher's taken-for-granted cultural competence.

The use of visual methods can widen the field of inquiry so that participants create images, which address questions the researcher may never have asked. Familiarity can be a problem of both the researcher and the participant, and my research has been hindered by both my own preconceptions and the assumptions made by participants about my knowledge of their lives; however, visual data can contribute to increased transactional validity. Transactional validity is the active interaction between the inquiry and the research participant demonstrated in the process between the researcher, the participants and the collected data. Transactional validity is dependent not only on the production of visual data per se but also on the element of participant control, the extended period of self-exploration and reflective elicitation in the accompanying interviews.

Visual techniques of data production can allow time for the participants to reflect on their lives and act to counter the tacit and normalising effect of insider knowledge. For example, as shown in [Figure 2](#), when I asked 15-year-old participant, Suzie, to create a collage around the theme of home, one of the images representing her home was a prison cell. The collection of images for a collage requires a lot of thought over an extended period of time in which participants actively assess their sense of place, space and self. For participants, then, visual data production can be a process in which their lives are reconsidered, re-evaluated and made strange. Suzie commented on how the process of data production, using magazines, photographs and the Internet, generated new ideas that she included in the finished collage. The image in [Figure 2](#) was included in response to her parent's restrictions on her use of public space away from home, but in the interview, Suzie said that she did not realise how much she felt like a prisoner until she began to create the collage and came across the image in a magazine, demonstrating the ways in which the visual can act as a tool of de-familiarisation.

Figure 2. Image from a collage of Suzie's home.

Exercise 3

The sense that research participants and viewers make of images depends upon cultural assumptions, personal knowledge and the contexts in which the picture is presented. As Gillian Rose argues, the reading of visual images suggests that the message lies within the visual image and that analysis provides the opportunity for the image to speak; however, the sense that viewers make of images depends upon cultural assumptions, personal knowledge and the context in which the picture is presented. In order to gain an understanding of the internal narrative of the image, then, it is imperative to acknowledge the role of the image-maker. For this reason, if the research study is interested in the ways in which people assign meanings to pictures, it is important to conduct an elicitation interview. Let someone else look at your drawing from Exercise 1 and look at their picture. Think about what the images mean to you and then discuss your ideas with each other. Do your ideas converge or are there stark

differences between your interpretations and the narrative the image-maker wanted to communicate?

Dissemination

The dissemination of research findings in relation to visual productions is a contentious issue within the social science community. Providing an opportunity for participants to remove images before they are seen by the researcher can be seen as positive in that it allows participants editorial control over research material; however, such control is limited as it does not extend to those images, which are not removed from the research process. The exclusion of photographs from forms of dissemination can be translated into the view that something is lost by deletion and anonymisation. However, Rose Wiles and colleagues have looked extensively at the publication of visual images and contend that although research that only includes 'safe' photographs can be accused of losing something of the discipline's edge, once research data are placed in the public domain and reworked in the media, the impact and interpretation of visual images become extremely difficult to control.

When displaying photographic visual data, those familiar with places or people will recognise them, and the consumption and interpretation of an image can extend beyond the researcher's intent. In many cases then, visual data, especially photographic data, are excluded, blurred or pixelated. However, such images are not entirely 'lost' when interviews are conducted around visual data and the related talk has instigated vivid descriptions and opened up an arena for communicating an interpretation of the visual. This discussion of visual artefacts engenders a high level of description that in turn allows the reader of the disseminated materials an opportunity to visualise the experiences of the participants in the study.

Another argument around dissemination is that eliminating images from academic publications can potentially remove the affective nature of the data. In this way, the reader loses the strength of emotional content that was present in the original research data. One novel way to try and retain engagement at the affective level is to use expressive writing styles, rather than more traditional forms of academic writing, which can act to constrain the creativity of the data. In order for publications to engage both

cognitively and emotionally with an audience, there has been a recent move towards forms of autoethnography (an ethnographic inquiry that utilises the autobiographic materials of the researcher as the primary data) and poetic writing, which I have used in my own dissemination of the findings from my research that applied methods of visual and narrative data production.

Summary

This 'methods in action' case has discussed a range of issues that can be encountered when employing visual data production techniques such as photo-elicitation, mapping and collage making. The case has reflected on the participatory potential of visual data production, the practicalities of working with visual data in the field, strategies for fighting familiarity and the challenges of disseminating visual-based research findings. The exercises provided some insights into the experience of being both participant and researcher in terms of producing and analysing visual artefacts. The learning outcomes should help you reflect on the material discussed in the case, and the list of further readings will be useful if you want to find out more about employing visual techniques as tools in qualitative research and perhaps utilising them in your research projects.

Discussion Questions

- 1. Why is it important to make an effort to 'fight familiarity' when we conduct qualitative research?
- 2. Are visual methods necessarily participatory?
- 3. Should researchers try out their methods of data production on themselves first before asking participants to engage with visual techniques?
- 4. Visual methods allow participants to reflect upon their lives and evaluate their sense of self. Why could this raise ethical concerns?
- 5. What are the main advantages and disadvantages of applying visual methodologies?

Further Reading

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