**Picture It! The use of visual methods in psychology teaching**

**Sal Watt and Caroline Wakefield**

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**“The sky represents endless possibilities and freedom”**

Abstract

This paper discusses the use of photo elicitation set as an assessment piece on a taught postgraduate programme. Theoretically located under the framework of Creative Analytic Practice (CAP), 30 students in groups of 3-4-were tasked with being both researcher and participant. The task required each group member to take 5 photographs on which they and their group members wrote a reflective piece. The student groups were free to select a topic of their own choice. The topics chosen were wide, varied and the students reflexively reported their enjoyment and engagement with the project and the method of data collection. However, for some, the power of photo elicitation saw some students engage in a cathartic journey which pedagogically raised our concern. Set as an assessment, this paper reports the potential and the creativity that photo elicitation can bring but at the same time it also discusses and makes suggestions around how to overcome the ethical issues encountered.

Key Words: Creative Analytic Practice, Photo Elicitation, Ethics, Catharsis, Reflexivity

Introduction

Qualitative research has long formed a crucial and evolving role in the teaching and research of psychology, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Willig, 2008). Ashworth (2007, p.4) explains that “a concentration on human *experience* as the central topic of psychology or a focus on *construction* or *interpretation* seems to lead, for us, almost inevitably to qualitative research”. Whilst this method traditionally and predominantly involved interviews and focus groups, changes in practice have seen this branch of psychology incorporating newer and more innovative techniques, in order to better understand participants lived experiences.

Creative analytic practice (CAP) is one such qualitative method which offers opportunity to explore lived experience and reflection. It aims to collaborate with participants and their real-life reflective accounts alongside socially and culturally relevant experiences (Parry & Johnson, 2007; Richardson, 2000, 1994; Schwandt, 2001). This method can include, but is not limited to, fictional stories, drama, poetry, dance, drawing and photography. One example of CAP is photo elicitation, which can be seen as a “simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (Harper, 2002, p.13) and Benjamin (1983) advocates that photo elicitation brings together static photographs alongside narrative as a valuable interpretative text. Photo elicitation has been used as a qualitative research method in a number of fields, including sociology (Hurdley, 2007), sport psychology (Wakefield & Watt, 2012), tourism (Scarles, 2010) and health (Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007) and methods such as this, can assist by “empowering and emancipating participants by making their experiences visible” (Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007, p.850).

One psychology-based study that has used this technique (Wakefield & Watt, 2012) involved the photographing of a competitor in an Ironman triathlon. Photographs were subsequently selected that particularly symbolised achievement of completing the event. The participant then reflected on the event, using the photographs as a tool, followed by thematic analysis conducted on the reflective transcript. Here, photo elicitation was the mechanism employed to evoke the emotions and memories of the participant’s lived experience using this innovative qualitative method.

However, despite growing prominence as a research method, it is often overlooked in qualitative research methods curricula. Therefore, the aim of the paper was to introduce such methods as a creative assessment element of a masters programme and bring alive qualitative research through encouraging students to fully engage in the associated reflexive process.

Method:

*Participants:*

30 students took part in the project (22 Females and 8 Males; age range 21 – 58 years). All participants were undertaking postgraduate study at a UK university. They participated as part of a research methods module which had been approved by a university ethics panel. Participants consented to taking part in the research study and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality regarding the work produced. Furthermore, participants agreed and drew up a signed a contract of conduct around respecting each other’s viewpoints and maintaining the privacy of the information shared. As the work was conducted as part of an assessment, the students retrospectively gave us permission to extracts from their student completed work being included in this paper.

*Procedure:*

The participants working in groups of 3-4 undertook a creative analytic project which focussed on photo elicitation. Specifically, the participants were instructed to construct ideas or choose a topic from which they could use photographs as the basis of a reflection. The photographs could either be pre-existing or taken for the specific purpose of the project. Participants then completed a reflective account of the thoughts and feelings elicited alongside each of their photographs. These were then shared between the group members. Key commonalities and differences in the accounts were discussed and thematically ordered. The respective groups then undertook a class presentation which exemplified their work and alongside produced an A3 poster which platformed their photographs. They then individually wrote a report that outlined and evaluated CAP as a theoretical framework, the method of photo elicitation, the approach and analytic process their respective group took and a discussion of the thematic findings of their respective group. The report also included a reflexive narrative which charted individual experience of the photo elicitation process and its use as a data collection tool for qualitative research.

Results:

In illustrating the findings of the students’ work we have selected three of the group projects as case studies to highlight the varied ways in which the students responded and indeed, embraced the visual assessment set. First, we will outline the projects, the key thematic findings and reflective comments. We will then explore both the reflexive comments of the student groups and finally following the three case studies, we will share our own reflections and pedagogic reflexive comments of the process.

Group 1: An Autobiographical Approach

This group selected photographs that represented both their past and present; photographs that typified their young childhood through to adolescence and, finally, to adulthood. In many ways this group took a more pedestrian or safer approach than other groups, preferring to remain faithful to the assessment remit and the example projects suggested and discussed with the class as a whole.

Taking a ‘then’ and ‘now’ approach, the overarching themes predictably charted their experience of ‘the importance of family and friends’, ‘education’, and, ‘hobbies’. Of family and friends, photographs typically included gatherings of family or friends that illustrated happy times, for example, the birth of a new sister or a birthday party. Typical of this group were comments like,

“She (mother) is the single most important driving force in my life and I would not have achieved anything near what I have without her influence”.

While for others this theme evoked pathos with photographs representing happy times such as spectating at a football match, but, with a lost loved one. This group reflected powerfully around their education and related experiences. For example, one student reflected,

“School was not a happy time for me and anyone who says your school years are the best years of your life is lying”

And yet while the comment above reflected the ‘then’ or the past, the ‘now’ comment by this student in respect of his undergraduate degree was described as “3 fantastic years” which he suggested had, “a strong positive effect on me overall”. Each member of this group proudly produced photographs of their cap and gown moment. The final theme in this group was around ‘hobbies’ and ranged from childhood reading such as ‘Bugs’ magazine to more recent hobbies and the importance of travelling and volunteering in third world countries and as one student reflected,

“this image represents travelling and how important it is to me to get out and about and witness various cultures at a first person perspective. I feel that the travelling … has served to bolster my awareness of various cultures around the world and allowed for a much deeper respect for humanity”.

Whatever approach taken, the above quote illustrates the reflective potential of photo elicitation; one where individuals just take time out to consider their own journey in life or standpoint.

Overall this group engaged and enjoyed the project, for example, one student said,

“As a whole I enjoyed doing this project. Throughout though, I found it difficult to analyse my own photographs, as without realising it, it can make you think about times in your childhood that may not be happy times … However, we were prepared for this as we covered it in our ethics so I was able to speak to group members to overcome this”

However, this group of students largely came from a scientific background which initially created a tension between objectivity and subjectivity and yet this above all other assessments was the one that seemed to break down the divide. As another student commented,

“Building on previous experience I have begun to truly appreciate the application of subjective qualitative analysis. Furthermore, my own biases that can arise from my own experiences can be beneficial when trying to justify links between discourse and images”.

As testament to the value and power of photo elicitation the same student went on to say that,

“regardless of subjectivity and objectivity problems, because of our group collaboration and adherence, our subjective deductions are just as valid as any quantitative approach could claim to be. I would argue the case further and state that biases that affect our subjectivity can in turn give a much more fruitful outcome and I believe that this is evident in this study”.

Group 2: Liverpool’s Waterfront

The second group, made up of mature students whose ages ranged from 35 to 56 chose to photograph scenes from Liverpool’s regenerated dockland and waterfront. Their focus was on what the waterfront signified to them personally in symbolic terms, for example, in respect of their own identity and for some, in respect of their familial heritage.

A thematic map illustrated the overarching themes across the group of four students. These themes included, ‘water’, ‘journeys’, ‘employment’ and ‘interpretation’ (both symbolic and cultural). In some form or other, all four students identified with these themes but this group took the assessment remit one step further. While they produced some highly symbolic photographs of Liverpool’s famous waterfront they embraced the full scope of creative analytic practice by further illustrating the importance of the photographs and their symbolic meaning alongside poetry and music. As an example, one member of the group powerfully expressed his heritage and personal journey through the theme of employment which encapsulated his working life and the transitions he had experience therein. These were situated alongside a self-authored poem and through the music and emotive words of Robert Smith’s song ‘in between days’. As a fellow group member astutely commented, the creative means chosen perfectly illustrated his awareness of “carrying his past as part of his present”.

The theme of ‘journey’ was again illustrated through poetry and music through the respective accounts of group members whose families had been part of the exodus from the Irish potato famine. The success in reflecting these familial bygone departures and arrivals at Liverpool’s waterfront is best summed up by one of the group members, who reflected,

“each person’s experience, voice and modes of expression became part of the project and linked to other voices: the poets and musicians whose work we had chosen, (the) voices of those who have worked in the docks and past relatives”.

This group, in going beyond the remit of the assessment, demonstrated their creative engagement with the assessment piece. One student explained,

“I really enjoyed using this method … this is quite surprising for me since I was initially much more drawn to quantitative research methods. However, I have now come to appreciate how much more depth is added to our understanding by using qualitative methods and its different approaches whereas a quantitative approach seems distant from and much less representative of the truth”.

While another stated,

“This was a fantastic opportunity to experiment with visual ethnography and I felt immediately comfortable with the approach. Visual methods could draw out so much thick, rich person-centred data in psychology”.

Group 3: Capturing Emotion

The rationale of this final group again stretched the imagination as they attempted to capture photographs which represented emotion. This group probably had the most difficulty in coming to terms with the remit of the assessment set and yet, amongst this group were the highest percentage marks. The group’s rationale was to explore each group members’ subjective perception of emotion and they did this by either taking new photographs or by identifying photographs that were personally symbolic to them as representative of particular emotion. The six key emotions included, sadness, joy, love, fear, surprise and anger (Ekman 1992). Each group member selected a photograph that personally represented each of these emotions. They then wrote a reflective piece on their own chosen photographs and those of their group members.

Sharing their reflections on emotions, the superordinate themes fell broadly under the four headings of nature, symbolism, life events and abstract. One group member summed it up thus,

“these photographs capture the abstract, fluid and transient nature of emotion – a subjective feeling. The photographs singularly *(acting)* as a metaphor for more tangible constructs, or as multiple metaphors”

In respect of the ‘abstract’ theme the group interestingly chose to take photographs that were subjectively negative. For example, anger was represented as a blurred edged red ring set on a black background. This angry abstract image evoked the comment,

“with no clear edges it’s difficult to control, circular it grips the whole person … the red however, is not uniformed showing the different intensities at which anger can be experienced”.

For another member of the group anger was captured as a broken screen of an IPhone; smashed in a moment of anger. While another member chose a photograph that abstractedly represented a complex mass that resembled a plant’s root system or disease, which was described as,

“a black mass of emotion, which can sit and simmer, or suddenly flair outwards through various networks”

The photographs which represented the emotions of love and surprise were thematically group under the heading ‘symbolism’ and were positively represented through common happy and cultural symbols such as gifts, children’s toys and an unfurling rose. The reflective comments of this latter photograph powerfully illustrate the emotional pathos that photographs can elicit.

“each petal is similar to the individuals shared experiences, the acquisition of which makes the love stronger, more forgiving”

This group above all others found it the most difficult to start the project. What was perceived as the ‘out there’ nature of the project caused much concern to some members of the group. “What do you want us to photograph and why?” comments initially stagnated the creativity of this group and yet this was the group who produced the most powerful and interesting of the projects. It was essential to this group that they grounded this work in psychology and they creatively did this by harnessing Ekman’s (1992) range of emotions. The difficult journey this group chartered, culminated in this final student reflexive account,

“I enjoyed the research process; particularly thinking about the nature of emotion and

how it could be visually represented. … the more I find out and think about visual

methods and visual ethnography the more I value it as a research method… In

combination with other (qualitative) assignments, this project has led me to really

appreciate and value qualitative methods and methodology”.

Tutor Reflections and Reflexivity

Our own brief experience of photo elicitation through research was the catalyst in asking postgraduate students to engage with this assessment and enter into a process where they were both the researcher and the researched. We gave them examples of how they might approach the project suggesting they might photograph the everyday life that surrounds a tourist attraction; looking back at formal school photographs; local ‘grot spots’ and so on. To say we were practised in this area is an overstatement and although both new to method of data collection, we approached it from different perspectives. Caroline largely from a quantitative background, while Sal from a qualitative ethnographic background. Necessarily our approaches were different, Caroline was apprehensive and unfamiliar with qualitative research while Sal, more familiar, took a more ‘gung-ho’ approach. Neither ideal but somewhere in the middle we thankfully met, both pondering on how well the assessment would work out. Of one thing we both were in agreement and that was how well the postgraduates embraced and engaged with the project. The work they produced was outstanding; it was both creative and insightful. The three case studies outlined earlier give a flavour of the topics and approaches they took but the scope of topic areas went far beyond what we can describe in the scope of this paper. To say that the students interpreted what we asked them to do successfully is an exaggeration for there were times when between us we were not always sure what we envisaged of them. As Caroline so aptly put it,

“they seemed to react with the same trepidation as I had when I initially thought of

using this method. A part of me thinks that they may have picked this up in the

delivery of the session – that in some way, my unease was evident to them”.

Through working with the students through drop-in sessions, a common understanding was achieved but while we anticipated that they would grasp photo-elicitation, the ways in which some groups embraced CAP and the creative means by which they illustrated their data and findings, went far beyond our expectations. The medium of music and poetry added a richness to the presentations that we just had not imagined. As Sal explained, “the students produced an amazing body of work which demonstrated their commitment and engagement”.

However, for as much as we can celebrate their enjoyment and engagement with the assessment task set, we also need to be reflexive of the elements we did not anticipate or, worse still, overlooked. We put in place ethical considerations which were passed by our university ethics board and agreed topics with all the respective groups but what came through at the presentations left us totally unprepared for the can of worms we potentially opened up. While our duty of care to this cohort has never been questioned by the students within it, our own professional and pedagogical practice has forced us to consider what we asked of these students and as a consequence we feel compelled to voice these alongside our concerns as a precautionary tale to other practitioners.

All 9 groups produced work of high quality and all said they enjoyed the process. While many of the groups divulged details of a personal nature, 2 groups in particular forayed into deep cathartic journeys and produced narratives of lost loved ones and/or emotional scarring. We had stringent guidelines and class discussion around the need for ethical respect and confidentiality of data and without question the students abided by this and immense respect was afforded between us all. However, the day of the presentations found us with an electric atmosphere full of pathos for the evocative narratives we listened to and it was one that left us both questioning; had we gone too far? Had we unknowingly expected too much of our students? And had they risen to a challenge that neither of us envisaged. We have discussed this long and hard and, it has shaped what we have expected of this year’s cohort. This is a data collection method that without question is effective and powerful in evoking thoughts and feelings but at the same time it has made us think seriously around its usage. In hindsight, while at the outset we considered all the ethical issues we envisaged, at another level we had not fully envisaged the power of photo elicitation and the degree or depth with which students might delve. Could we have envisaged this? Should we have exerted more influence? As Sal pertinently highlights “these were not first year students, they were masters students and to prescribe or deny them this opportunity might in itself be unethical”. This is a difficult deliberation. We are very proud of the work our students produced but around duty of care, we are also more mindful to set clearer guidelines from which students cannot deviate into deep crevices.

Discussion

Despite the assessment remit focussing specifically on photo elicitation, many of the students engaged beyond our expectations and introduced reflective comments alongside other creative elements, such as poetry and music, to further illustrate their immersion in the project. The emergent discursive themes included students expressing the process as both empowering and cathartic and one that developed their understanding of the scope of qualitative research and therein the importance of the reflexive process.As Harper (2002, p.13) suggests the cathartic process provides opportunity for, “images (to) evoke deeper elements of the human consciousness than do words”.

Some of the participants opted to use pre-existing photographs of their childhood, and their reflexive report centred on memories associated with that time in their lives. Here, the photographs acted as a reminder and as Sands (2002, p.77) points out, “memory is served by visually reviewing a photograph”. Other participants took photographs of specific objects or places for the purpose of the project. This is known as photovoice, where participants act “as authors of the photographs” (Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007, p.850) and use these to reflect on a pre-determined theme.

In conclusion, photo elicitation, and more widely CAP, was extremely beneficial as a teaching tool and as a form of assessment. Furthermore, it was worthwhile in terms of aiding understanding of the creative nature of qualitative research. The participants engaged with the process wholly, experienced a degree of catharsis, and exceeded expectations of their involvement. Collier and Collier (1999, p.13) explain that “most photographs are a minute time sample – a hundredth-of-a-second slice of reality”. However, for our participants, these photographs evoked deep emotions spanning a number of time-periods and contexts. This paper advocates the use of photo elicitation particularly at postgraduate level but we hope our experience of the depths to which our students engaged with the process of photo elicitation will at least serve as a precautionary tale to consider the ethical and assessment boundaries put in place when considering this research method.

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