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Citation: Warhurst, Russell and Black, Kate (2015) The use of photo-elicitation interviewing in qualitative HRD research. In: Handbook of Research Methods on HRD. Handbooks of Research Methods in Management . Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, pp. 127-140. ISBN 9781781009239

Published by: Edward Elgar

URL: <http://www.e-elgar.com/shop/handbook-of-research-m...> <<http://www.e-elgar.com/shop/handbook-of-research-methods-on-human-resource-development>>

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9. The use of photo-elicitation interviewing in qualitative HRD research

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SUMMARY

The chapter provides an overview of the as yet under-utilised tool of photo-elicitation interviewing. It examines the development of this method and its value to HRD research. A case of non-formal and expansive workplace learning of public sector professionals is offered to illustrate the application of this approach in HRD-research practice.

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 8 provided an overview of the potential for visual approaches in HRD research, offering a ‘toolbox’ from which HRD-researchers might select a visual method appropriate to their research needs. This chapter gives attention to one of these approaches offering the greatest potential within HRD research: the, as yet, under-utilised tool of photo-elicitation interviewing. Drawing upon an illustrative case of non-formal, expansive workplace learning of public sector professionals, we examine the efficacy of this research method, providing details of how the study was set up, how participant generated images were used to elicit dialogue and, finally, how the ensuing data was analysed.

OVERVIEW OF PHOTO-ELICITATION

Within the qualitative paradigm, interviews predominate as a data collection tool for gaining an insight into participants’ subjective worlds. However, while they offer a flexible and ‘powerful way of helping people to articulate their tacit perceptions, feelings and understandings’ (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p.32), this approach relies upon the participants being able to verbalise these meanings and understandings. Where the phenomena under study is complex or problematic, gaining this cognitive access can be challenging. Photo-elicitation interviewing offers a means of

facilitating this access. As the previous chapter demonstrated, the provision of images is intended to act as a catalyst to help the participants' talk about and expand upon difficult, perhaps abstract concepts, uninhibited by the constraints of speech alone (Pink, 2007; Gauntlett, 2007). However, similarly to other visual methods, very little has been written about the use and integration of images or photos into the interviewing process (Hurworth et al., 2005, p.52).

Photo-elicitation involves the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview (Harper, 2002). Whilst most elicitation studies utilise photographs, as is the focus of this chapter, other visual images such as cartoons, adverts, paintings and graffiti may be used interchangeably within this technique (visual-elicitation).

The development of photo-elicitation interviewing may be traced back to Morin and Rouch's 'Chronique d'un été', an experimental film in which participants, who were filmed discussing culture and happiness in the working classes, examine the level of reality they thought the film secured. However, it was the anthropologist John Collier who first coined the term 'photo-elicitation' in his work on mental health and psychological stress undertaken in the 1960s (Collier and Collier, 1986). This work highlighted how using photos improved participants' memories and stimulated more comprehensive interviews. Nevertheless, within the traditionally 'word-based' field of social research, the use of photo-elicitation interviewing, as with other visual methods, remains 'sparse' (Ray and Smith, 2012) and has, until relatively recently, attracted only a small following. More recently we have witnessed the increased use of visual methods across various disciplines and participant-types, including education (Rasmussen, 2004), psychology (Salmon, 2001), housing (Suchar and Rotenberg, 1994) and nursing (Riley and Manias, 2003). Harper (1997, 2002, 2005), Banks (2001) and Pink (2004, 2007) offer significant contributions to the field. This rise in popularity perhaps mirrors the rise of imagery as the dominant mode of communication in today's society. Warren (2008, 2009) also notes how the rise of digital technology has made the collection, manipulation and storage of images simple and cheap. However, photo-elicitation interviewing still remains on the margins of research traditions.

DESCRIPTION OF PHOTO-ELICITATION INTERVIEWING

Conventional approaches to photo-elicitation use photos as an 'icebreaker' activity to develop a rapport with the participants. This approach encourages open discussion and acts as an aide memoir to stimulate thought and

invoke memory within interview or focus group discussion. The photo, which is typically provided by the researcher and assumed to be meaningful to the participant(s), acts as a prompt to both 'mine' information from the participants and to encourage them to reflect upon what is depicted. This may trigger meanings and interpretations unseen by the researcher, thereby helping to expand their perspectives. By contrast, contemporary approaches place emphasis upon Hurworth's (2003) 'autodriving reflexive photography' and 'photovoice' which use participant generated images. Subsequent discussions are then 'driven' by the participants, empowering them 'to construct what matters to them' (Wang, 1997, p.382). Offering a 'bridge' between the researcher and participants' worlds, participant images enable the collaborative exploration of perceptions of difficult, often hidden, hard-to-access facets of their lives which might be otherwise overlooked (Widdance-Twine, 2006), while helping participants to express self-understanding and emotions. This approach generates a shared interpretation and understanding of experiences and practices as well as discussion about the broader significance and meaning of the images. Both the conventional and contemporary approaches to photo-elicitation interviewing, it is asserted, elicit richer data and extended personal narratives of the details of participants' everyday lives and experiences than conventional interview techniques (Pink, 2007; Ray and Smith, 2012). This chapter will specifically focus upon photos taken by the participants.

As can be drawn from the discussion above, photo-elicitation interviewing presents many opportunities for the HRD-researcher in exploring hard-to-access concepts such as learning. We now turn our attention to how data is actually generated, that is, elicited, through this technique. We propose that this process comprises three key stages.

ELICITING THE DATA IN PHOTO-ELICITATION INTERVIEWING

Initially, in adopting an 'autodriving' approach to data generation, participants are requested to produce a small portfolio of photos and/or collected images (typically 3–6 photos or images) in advance of an interview that will help them to reflect upon and best explain the particular phenomenon/phenomena being researched. Typically the HRD-researcher will pose a couple of broad prompt questions to help the participants in compiling their portfolios. For example, 'what does . . . mean to you?'; 'how would you explain . . .?' However, care should be taken in suggesting examples of photos or images that they might provide for risk of failing to 'break the frame' of the participants' view (Harper,

2002, p.20); in other words, overly directing or shaping the participants' views. However, as is discussed below, to eliminate ethical concerns, clear guidance on the generation or collection of the photos and images should be provided to the participants at the outset. The photos and images act as prompts in the subsequent interview. Therefore, the interview may require little direction from the researcher, with the images providing both focus and structure. These interviews typically generate a more extended narrative than conventional interviews.

During the interviews, the researcher asks participants to explain what they have included within their portfolio and to talk around each photo or image, explaining the meaning that each holds for them. By taking this approach, the participants are able to lead the researcher into their worlds, to determine the order in which they tell their stories and to talk about the various topics from their perspectives. However, the researcher might also choose to ask the participant about the importance of specific objects or arrangements within a photo or image. This enables an understanding of the situation or phenomena to be co-constructed. Although within photo-elicitation interviewing it is intended that the researcher should act as a co-creator of meaning rather than director, s/he may choose to additionally use a series of pre-devised prompt questions. These questions may enable the examination of aspects of relevance to the research that are not directly addressed through the photos or images, to provide clarification of points raised. Researchers may choose to record the interviews, with participant permission, to enable the analysis of verbatim transcripts.

The final stage of photo-elicitation research comprises analysis of the data and consideration of the means by which both the interview transcripts and the visual data might be analysed. These processes are discussed further below.

An illustrative case is presented towards the end of this chapter. This provides further details of the actual process by which photo-elicitation interviewing might be undertaken with reference to a specific research aim. Before this we discuss some of the ethical and practical dilemmas surrounding the use of photo-elicitation interviewing beyond those typically associated with qualitative data generation. We then offer examples of analysis.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS ARISING FROM PHOTO-ELICITATION AND OTHER VISUAL RESEARCH

Ethical considerations should inform and underpin all approaches to, and methods of, social research (Robson, 2011). However, for visual

research, especially using photos, this remains an under-developed, and indeed, hotly debated, area. Lapenta (2011) asserts that visual methods pose fewer ethical concerns than most qualitative methods because in essence the method is a participatory form of research, prioritising the voices of the participants, especially in the case of those from marginalised groups. Pauwels (2011) supports this position in advocating that through engaging individuals and communities in producing photos, this promotes participant empowerment, offering them *advance* control over what they photograph and discuss. Conversely, other scholars have asserted that photo data creates an additional level of complexity and challenge to existing ethical dilemmas facing qualitative researchers (Harper, 2005). Whilst within HRD research it might be argued that many of the concerns surrounding the use of images, notably the portrayal of children and vulnerable people, are unlikely to be of concern, attention should be drawn to two key ethical concerns.

Firstly, consideration should be given to the issue of informed consent. As Davies (2008) emphasises, participants may feel differently about providing consent for different images and may also wish to offer varied consent, according to the intended purposes, notably where dissemination is to extend to publication. This may especially be the case when photos hold particular sensitivities for the participants. However, in the case with 'found' images, and where individuals have been 'captured' within the background of a photo, it must be considered to what extent it is actually possible to trace the individuals either depicted within, or responsible for producing, them. The right to photograph the public without their consent, for research purposes, has not really been established, nor has the use of photos of public places and organisational 'spaces' without informed consent (Wiles et al., 2011). Whilst the UK Data Protection Act 1988 might consider the image of an individual to be personal data and therefore require consent to be obtained, the publishing of such images without this consent remains an everyday practice across print, web and broadcast journalism. In order to minimise risk, where images do include individuals, some researchers advocate concealing, pixelating or blurring to anonymise individuals (Wiles et al., 2008). However, others criticise such practice for de-humanising (Sweetman, 2008) and soliciting connotations of criminality (Banks, 2001).

Secondly, the HRD-researcher should be mindful of problems of distortion and falsification, whether intentional or unintentional, as images take on meanings, or are used to depict scenarios contradictory to those for which they were created.

In addressing these various concerns, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) National Centre for Research Methods has published

Guidelines for Visual Research (Wiles et al., 2008), with Vince and Warren (2012) offering ‘responsible photography’ guidelines. When considering publication of empirical research containing visual data, journal and book publishers are now increasingly issuing guidelines for their use.

In conclusion, as Davies (2008) advises, the prudent and sensitive visual HRD-researcher will judge carefully who, both morally and legally, has the right to use photos and images, especially where there are practical barriers to seeking consent. This judgement will be based upon the researcher’s own moral beliefs and upon their professional judgement. Ultimately, as with any research, the key aim should be to prevent exploitation and protect the vulnerability of the participants and the researchers.

RESEARCH VALIDITY USING PHOTO-ELICITATION INTERVIEWING GENERATED DATA

The significance of any research rests upon the credibility of its findings. Depending upon the epistemological approach adopted, the visual researcher must comply with the appropriate research standards. In undertaking photo-elicitation interviewing research, the HRD-researcher must take account of the central research standards underpinning the approach they have adopted. In the case of a positivist methodological approach, this concerns reliability, validity and generalisability, whereas the qualitative researcher is concerned with the trustworthiness and credibility, authenticity and relevance of the findings.

Reliability, the extent to which the data collection technique(s) will yield consistent findings and is not subject to error, is considered crucial in positivist research. However, reliability presents a key challenge in qualitative research, which applies the alternative standards of trustworthiness and credibility. Yet, trustworthiness and credibility presents one of the main challenges for visual researchers. As Goldstein (2007) asserted, ‘all photos lie’. Therefore, are still and moving images an accurate rendition and truthful? Critics of visual approaches have exposed scams such as mock-ups, deceptions and manipulation of materials prior to or post ‘capture’. Critics also assert the occurrence of bias and their use in propaganda but note how, to the qualitative analyst, such use provides invaluable data in itself.

Validity, for the positivist researcher, is concerned with whether the findings represent what they profess to do, that is, whether the data collection methods adopted accurately measured what they set out to measure (Bryman, 2008). In the case of visual research, concern is with internal validity, that is, the congruence between observations made and

their reporting. Such validity is assured through the researcher's pre-existing experience within this research context and through the relatively extensive data collection period. However, for the qualitative researcher, greater concern is with authenticity and confirmability rather than validity. So, for example, the HRD-researcher must establish their neutrality in representing the participants' views.

The issue of whether we can, or should, generalise from qualitative data has been a topic of considerable discussion for many decades. However, the role of qualitative research is to interpret participants' meanings within social contexts, rather than measuring, explaining or predicting. Therefore, the visual HRD-researcher should ensure the quality of their research by demonstrating that s/he is portraying an honest representation of the data. The careful documentation of each stage of the research and analysis process will enable the research users and readers to make informed decisions regarding its relevance to other contexts. This approach should also enable the participants to determine the value of the research for extending their understanding of their social context and for understanding the views of others within it, while also assessing its value to the wider community for engendering change or improvement.

ANALYSING PHOTO-ELICITATION INTERVIEWING GENERATED DATA

As we examined in Chapter 8, many different approaches have been adopted in analysing visual data. We focused upon two specific approaches typically used: a simple form of content analysis and a symbolic semiotics-based interpretation. These approaches are differentiated by the extent to which a literal reading is made of the conscious content and to what extent account is taken of the unconscious facets also encapsulated within the images. We will now illustrate these two approaches by offering examples of their use in the analysis of photo-elicitation interviewing generated data. The research from which these examples are drawn aimed to understand managers' conceptions of their learning.

Figure 9.1 is an image of a motorbike, a Harley Davidson Sportster. This participant generated image was provided to illustrate his belief in the importance of continuous learning. He spoke of how this learning was critical to 'keeping the bike moving, lubricated . . . bringing in another part, replacing a part, changing the ways we do it when we've used the wrong spares . . . doing it differently to how we did it before'.

This image might also be interpreted in a very different way when adopting a symbolic perspective. Informed by Pirsig's (1974) *Zen and the*



Figure 9.1 Participant-provided image of a Harley Davidson Sportster (reproduced with permission)

Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, it might be suggested that this research participant understood lifelong learning to be down to attitude. That is, that there is a need to have an approach to life and learning that is varied, with the day-to-day routine of classical mastery potentially transformed through creativity and intuition that come through, a Zen-like, being ‘in the moment’. Moreover, it might also be asserted that this participant realised the foreseeable and unforeseeable dangers of riding this ‘bike’, and of managerial work, and that he knowingly and freely accepted these dangers.

Another research participant provided Figure 9.2 to illustrate her need to have her own office away from the busy open-plan environment of the contact centre that she managed, in order to ‘get her head down to more conceptual and more strategic work’. The researcher might also analyse this image at a symbolic level and speculate that it was selected for conveying a sense of security, a meaning which might have some veracity given the context of job cuts in this manager’s unit.



Figure 9.2 Participant-provided image of her office door and lock (reproduced with permission)

CASE STUDY: USE OF PHOTO-ELICITATION INTERVIEWING IN ILLUSTRATIVE CASE OF NON-FORMAL AND EXPANSIVE MANAGERIAL LEARNING

In this final section we draw upon an illustrative case of non-formal and expansive manager learning to illustrate the use of photo-elicitation interviewing in HRD-research practice. In this case-study example we will provide details of how the study was set up, how participant-generated images were used to elicit dialogue and, finally, how the ensuing data was analysed. As explained above, this approach places emphasis upon the use of images, typically photos, for generating richer narratives than interviews alone.

The purpose of the empirical research was to examine how managers perceived the nature of their day-to-day management practice and the opportunities that this offered for workplace learning both for these individuals themselves and their teams. Taking a qualitative and largely inductive approach, the research focused upon a case study of MBA-educated middle-managers from within two English local authorities. Adopting a participatory approach to photo-elicitation, the 29 volunteer participants were requested, in advance of individual interviews, to create a portfolio of five images that helped them to answer the simple,

but central research question, ‘what does being a manager mean for you?’. Within the interviews, which lasted approximately one hour, these images acted as stimuli to help explore the participants’ perceptions of being a manager. Additionally, the images acted as an aid to help the participants explore and express themselves. One participant presented a photo of his unit’s staff meeting. Although this participant was the leader of this unit, he was sitting in a peripheral position at the table. Firstly, he used this image to explain how he believed that he delegated work, for example the charring of the portrayed meeting, to members of his team to enable their development. Secondly, he spoke of how he coached staff, illustrating this through another member of the unit who was about to undertake a presentation and with whom he had spent time enhancing her presentation skills. A further participant, a youth social-work manager, provided a photo of an ice-cream van with two of her team ‘selling’ ice-cream cones (Figure 9.3).

Reflecting upon this image, she explained how, working with other professionals, notably those in education, health and the police, her team was charged with delivering various ‘messages’ to teenage kids during the school holidays. Following open discussions, facilitated by the participant-manager, the team had both condensed the elements of advice



Figure 9.3 Participant-provided image of her team ‘selling’ ice cream (reproduced with permission)

which they felt were most needed by teenagers in their area and identified an approach to directing that advice through ice-cream sales.

The researcher's questions typically took the form of simple requests for clarification around, or for further detail of, the images themselves. For example, one of the participants provided an image of herself and her friends on the shores of a lake in the English Lake District. She commented that, for her, this image meant two things: firstly, having a goal and achieving it – in this case the goal was the summit of the distant peak – and, secondly, the importance of work–life balance. The interviewer questioned her further about the first of these meanings, asking her, amongst other questions, whether she felt that she led from the front or allowed others to find their own way. The participant replied that in this instance, although she often walked the hills, she didn't know the area in the photograph particularly well and so, therefore, they were collectively finding their way together.

Qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts was undertaken, with analytical codes induced from within the data (Silverman, 2011). These codes were refined and organised through the course of the analysis and through iteration with established theoretical understandings. Focus was also upon identifying codes emergent within the images themselves, but grounded within the interview data. For example, in illustrating the example offered above, the codes 'leadership as providing a goal' and 'leadership as enabling others' were induced. Participant validation, enabled though the participants being invited to comment on an initial draft of the findings, assured the credibility of the findings.

DISCUSSION

Photo-elicitation interviewing offers a number of advantages both for the HRD-researcher and his/her participants when used either as the primary method of data collection or as a secondary form. Perhaps its greatest advantage lies in its decentring of the authority of the researcher and empowering of the participants through overturning the power dynamics that prevail within standard interviews (Warren, 2005, p.867). With participant-generated photo-elicitation interviewing the participants themselves have far greater involvement throughout the process. Notably, their perspective is foregrounded so *they* act as 'guide' and 'expert' rather than being the *subject* of the interview (Winddance-Twine, 2006, p.496). They also have *advance* control over what they photograph and have opportunities to reflect upon the questions and the issues they raise in advance. This will help them to better understand how they think about

themselves, rather than requiring them to provide an instantaneous verbal response (Walker and Weidel, 1985).

From the HRD-researcher's perspective, photo-elicitation interviewing holds many benefits. The use of images within interviews offers potential 'access' to what the researchers themselves cannot participate in: the contextual, emotional and cultural (Pink, 2007, p.88). This access provides opportunities for exploring phenomenon and experiences which words are unable to capture, that participants are unable to verbalise, or that they overlook as inconsequential. As Harper (2002) asserts, they 'mine deeper shafts into . . . human consciousness,' offering 'new ways of seeing' (p.23).

From a theoretical perspective, photo-elicitation interviewing offers richness to potentially develop theory and knowledge within the field of study. Perhaps most notably the signs, symbols and perceptions offered present multiple perspectives and interpretations. This juxtaposes the fixed meanings offered through the dominant positivist approaches to examining social phenomena, such as those offered in statistics and charts, (Harper, 2000). As Becker (2002, p.11) concludes, 'what can you do with pictures that you couldn't do just as well with words? The answer is that I can lead you to believe that the abstract tale I've told you has a real flesh and blood life and is therefore to be believed'. Therefore, this approach presents a basis to move beyond existing studies to inductively develop the theorising in this field.

However, it is recognised that photo-elicitation interviewing is not without its shortcomings. Perhaps most significantly, the use of photos presents ethical concerns that might not be encountered through using more traditional methods of qualitative research. Moreover, interviews, in whatever form, are inherently limited by their being a contrived rather than naturalistic interaction, and as with conventional interviews, the researcher is unable to account for gaps between what the participants say and what they actually do in practice. Whilst the provision of photographs specifically depicting practice may help to alleviate this, they too present a 'staged and selected' account of reality in terms of what is selected and how it is framed (Widdance-Twine, 2006, p.502). With the participants themselves typically being absent from the photographs, their actual 'place' within this reality is omitted (Felstead et al., 2004). Photo-elicitation interviewing also assumes that the participants are able and willing, both cognitively and physically, to provide responses that are not merely socially desirable (King and Horrocks, 2010). Finally, from a purely pragmatic perspective, photos present issues of copyright, especially if the research is to be published. This requires a clear agreement over who owns the images before the research project commences.

This chapter has suggested that photo-elicitation interviewing is an

invaluable alternative to the conventional, and arguably stale, methodologies of questionnaires and interviews typically favoured by HRD-researchers. The use of images enables the researcher to come far closer to the participants' lived realities than with conventional methods, generating far deeper, richer and more interesting data for the researcher, participant and reader and user of the research.

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ANNOTATED FURTHER READING

- Pink, S. (2007). *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2nd edition). London: Sage. Offers a practical and accessible approach for HRD-researchers new to using visual methods, notably photo-elicitation interviewing.
- Warren, S. (2009). Visual methods in organizational research. In A. Bryman and D. Buchanan (eds), *Handbook of Organizational Research Methods* (pp.566–582). London: Sage. Provides a useful introduction to the use of visual methods, especially photos in qualitative research.