

Photo Elicitation: Useful Supplemental Tool for Qualitative Interviews with Youths

Abstract

Photo elicitation is the idea of inserting a photograph (or other visual material) into a research interview. It has been documented that contemporary modes of expression (such as photographs) can be beneficial in research interviews with youths. This article describes a photo elicitation protocol used with older youths and provides insight on the benefits and challenges of using photo elicitation for qualitative research purposes.

Keywords: [photo elicitation](#), [qualitative interviews](#), [research method](#), [youth](#)

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Introduction

Photo elicitation is the idea of inserting a photograph (or other visual material) into a research interview (Harper, 2002). Involving photos in interviews promotes longer, more comprehensive interviews while helping alleviate participant fatigue and repetition (Collier, 1957, p. 58). Viewing photos prods memory and increases the likelihood that participants will share emotional statements (Collier, 1957, p. 58). Images can promote deep and reflective talk (Harper, 2002) and facilitate verbalization and insight (Sibeoni et al., 2017). Photo elicitation activities also can promote collaboration between the researcher and study participant (Harper, 2002). Additionally, contemporary modes of expression (such as photographs) can be beneficial specifically in research interviews with youth (Mack, Giarelli, & Bernhardt, 2009).

How It Works

Photo elicitation can be used to supplement qualitative interviews for research purposes. Photo elicitation can be a stand-alone technique or an initial activity to help establish context and direction for successive interviews. Photo elicitation techniques can be adapted to a variety of studies and settings; Extension professionals conducting research have the flexibility to make adaptations that are appropriate for their specific research projects.

Steps for Using Photo Elicitation with Research Participants

As part of a larger study conducted by our research team, Author Mott used a photo elicitation protocol with 17- and 18-year-old 4-H and FFA youths to explore the meaning of being involved in livestock production throughout childhood. Author Mott used the photo elicitation protocol for initial interviews and then followed up with on-farm interviews several weeks later. The steps in the photo elicitation protocol Author Mott used, as described in her words, were as follows:

1. In inviting participants via email to be in the study, I encouraged them to locate photographs they felt depicted what it meant to be a livestock producer throughout childhood. I explained that I would be asking them to share these photographs and describe what was happening in each photograph when we met for the photo elicitation activity. Although I initially asked for four or five photographs, all participants came to the interviews with more.
2. I met with each participant individually in his or her home. Most participants led me to the kitchen or dining room, although one met with me on the front porch. The setting should be a space that is comfortable and convenient for the participant.
3. During the photo elicitation activity, I provided a basic prompt for each photograph: "Tell me about your pictures." The follow-up question elicited more information and was phrased as "What else do you remember?"
4. I followed the participant's lead as stories unfolded about the photographs, gently asking questions to guide the participant back to the topic at hand or seek clarification as needed.
5. I thanked the participant for the interview and scheduled a time for a follow-up interview on the farm.
6. I wrote some reflective notes immediately following the activity, and I spoke others into a recording device while driving home. These memos were referred to during the data analysis process. Subtle nuances and interesting observations can quickly be forgotten if this step is not performed immediately.

Benefits

Literature has suggested that using photo elicitation to supplement interviews with research participants can provide a variety of benefits. We submit that researchers may notice the following benefits when using photo elicitation:

- A participant's having an item to handle and focus on can help break the ice between the participant and the researcher.
- Photographs provide additional context for the researcher, providing clues about areas that may need to be explored in future interviews.
- The technique is flexible and can be adapted to fit a variety of contexts, settings, participant characteristics, and situations.

- Photographs provide a touch point for participants to begin their stories, reminding them of feelings and placing them in the center of their experiences.

Considerations

Photo elicitation is not the right tool for every interview with a youth. Researchers must carefully consider research topic and participant characteristics when deciding whether photo elicitation is an appropriate fit. Specific factors to consider when planning and conducting photo elicitation are as follows:

- Photo elicitation requires a time commitment for participants to locate meaningful photographs before the interview. The researcher may mention this in his or her invitation to participate in the research.
- This technique requires the researcher to be comfortable with silence and allow time for the participant to speak. It takes time for participants to process photographs and talk about them. If the researcher does not allow enough wait time, he or she will interrupt the participant's train of thought or cut participant comments short.
- This technique may lead to family members' or others' influencing youth participants. For example, a mother may lay out what she considers to be meaningful photographs for a teenaged participant. This unconstructive situation usually becomes evident during the participant interviews. The researcher may want to include language in consent documents reminding parents that this is their child's project and specifically asking them not to provide direction, advice, or oversight.
- Although interviewing participants in settings that are familiar to them (such as their homes) tends to be effective, the researcher should consider that family members can be tempted to interject themselves into the photo elicitation activity if they can overhear the conversation. The researcher should develop strategies ahead of time for dealing with this challenge.
- Sometimes photographs can bring up memories that generate anxiety or sadness. The researcher should consider whether the research topic is appropriate for the technique and make a plan to deal with participant distress that could occur.
- The ages and developmental stages of the participants are relevant. For example, because older teenagers are capable of abstract thinking, are able to explain how and why things happen, and tend to enjoy sharing their perspectives with others (Schmitt-McQuitty, Smith, & Young, 2011), they are excellent candidates for photo elicitation. Developmentally, younger children do not have the capability of articulating their thoughts with the same level of depth as older youths.

Conclusion

Photo elicitation is a tool that makes sense for working with adolescents; it empowers participants by giving them greater control over the interview process (Darbyshire, 2005). It also helps establish a more natural relationship between the researcher and the participant (Didkowsky, Ungar, & Liebenberg, 2010). Inviting participants to share photos may help illuminate perspectives and nuances that would not normally present themselves through other qualitative research techniques (Ali-Khan & Siry, 2014; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004;

Mandelco, 2013; Snyder & Kane, 1990). Although using photo elicitation as a research tool can present challenges, Extension professionals conducting research should consider whether doing so could benefit their interviews with youth.

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