Picture It! The use of visual methods in psychology teaching

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Photo elicitation theoretically located under Creative Analytic Practice was set as an assessment on a taught postgraduate programme. In groups of three to four, 30 students acted as both researcher and participant. Group topics were self-selected, each member took five photographs that group members reflected on. Topics chosen were varied and students reflexively critically reported their experience of the method. The power of photo elicitation saw some students engage in a cathartic journey which pedagogically raised concern. This paper reports both the potential and creativity of photo elicitation but also discusses and makes suggestions on how to overcome ethical issues.

Keywords: *Creative analytic practice; photo elicitation; ethics; catharsis; reflexivity.*

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* appears 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 qualitative research in 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; Schwandt, 2001). This method can include, but is not limited to, fictional stories, drama, poetry, dance, drawing and photography. Such creative means offer mediums of expression that complement or hold the potential to go beyond the spoken word. The opportunity for such free expression has been used in therapeutic applica-

tions, such as stories of survivors of breast cancer who as part of their treatment regimen took up the leisure pursuit of dragon boat racing (Parry, 2007). Working with disabled graduates, Gilles (2007) engaged CAP and in particular poetry through the metaphor of a 'tree', as a way of encapsulating their experiences as they made the transition from university into community life.

Another creative example of CAP is that of photo elicitation, which can be seen as the 'simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview' (Harper, 2002, p.13) to aid recall or evoke related emotions. 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), tourism (Scarles, 2010) and health (Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007) whereby methods such as this, can assist in 'empowering and emancipating participants by making their experiences visible' (Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007, p.850).

However, in psychology the use of visual images has largely been employed in experimental work, for example, face recognition, attraction and so on (Reavey & Johnson, 2008). Qualitative approaches have tradition-

ally followed a discursive approach that focuses on spoken words rendering studies that use photographs and photo elicitation few and far between. However, that said, there are examples in psychological research that utilise visual images and photographs which through the process of photo elicitation allow the voices of our participants to be heard. Such examples include work undertaken in health psychology (Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Sandhu et al., 2007); educational psychology (Graham & Kilpatrick, 2010) and more recently our own work based in sport psychology (Wakefield & Watt, 2012). In this sports psychology study a competitor in an Ironman triathlon was photographed throughout the day as he completed his challenge. Photographs were subsequently selected that particularly symbolised achievement of completing the event. The participant was then asked to reflect on the event, using the photographs as a tool. 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 which in our study was the theme of 'achievement'. Using photovoice in this way builds on the work of Wang and Burris (1997) but in particular that of Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001) who suggests that in participatory research, participants may reflect on their own photographs in respect of personal change. A thematic analysis was then conducted on the reflective transcript. Here, photo elicitation was then, 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, our aim was to introduce a lesser used and creative technique into the psychology curricula of a Master's programme; the objectives underpinning the learning outcomes were to bring alive the varied nature of qualitative research techniques. From a learning and teaching perspective, we wanted the students to engage at a deep level of learning (Biggs & Tang, 1999) but one from which they could gain theoretical and practical experience of being both the researcher and the researched and, associated, the many ethical and practical considerations that such a dual process brings. Our focus was to create an effective learning environment that would facilitate the students' learning (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999); one that would capture their imagination but that would also support and scaffold their creativity (Biggs & Tang, 1999). Schell et al. (2009) undertook a very similar study and highlighted the unique experience that both the students and the teaching staff enjoyed in exploring visual methods as both a data collection and learning tool. It was never our intention that this change to the postgraduate curriculum should go on to inform a learning and teaching paper. At the outset our objective was simple; to enhance our curriculum and thereby enrich the student learning experience. However, the introduction of visual methods, photo elicitation and photovoice exceeded all our expectations in engaging the students and through the production of some powerful work. With retrospective permission from our students we feel compelled to share their work, our collaborative experience in the promotion of visual methods as a powerful learning and teaching mechanism.

Method
Participants
Thirty students took part in the project (22 females and eight males; age range 21 to 58 years). All participants were undertaking postgraduate study at a UK institute of higher education in the north-west of England. They participated as part of a research methods module which had been approved by the Psychology Department's Ethics Board at our home institution. Participants gave fully informed consent before taking part in the research study and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality regarding the work produced. Furthermore,

participants agreed and drew up and, signed a contract of conduct between each other around respecting each others' 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 include their data and use extracts from their student completed work in this paper. Students who did not provide this retrospective consent retained their marks and academic credits for the assessment, but their work does not appear in any form (case studies or reflective comments) in this report.

Procedure
The participants working in groups of three to four 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. Although the groups were free to choose a topic of their choice, they did so in negotiation with the tutors; this collaborative arrangement ensured that the topics chosen and the nature of the photographs fell within British Psychological Society ethical requirements. That is that photographs or pre-existing photographs did not contravene the privacy of members of the general public or indeed, the group members themselves. Once the groups identified or took their photographs, the student participants then completed a reflective account of the thoughts and feelings elicited alongside each of their photographs. They then shared these with their group members. Key commonalities and differences in the reflective 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. As such, the assessment for the course was a combined mark of the group presentation, A3 poster, individual write-up and reflexive report. As this module of the course focussed predominantly on research methods, the learning outcomes included; to demonstrate the ability to use different research techniques, and critically assess the utility and appropriateness of diverse methods and techniques. As such, in completing the project, and associated assessment, these aims were met and then further reiterated in the qualitative teaching on the module.

Results
When completing the project, the students were creative in their approach which led to varied and creative assessments. For example, groups covered local locations, Manchester market culture, Blackpool's promenade and the Liverpool docks. Furthermore, some groups opted to use pre-existing photographs to explore their chosen theme. 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 approach was taken by a number of groups who selected photographs that represented both their past and/or their present; photographs that typically illustrated their

young childhood through to adolescence and/or, adulthood. As it was based on their own experiences and photographs evoking personal memories, this project had the potential to be emotion-laden and for some of the other groups who chose this approach this was the case. It would be unethical and insensitive for us to draw on such cases and importantly would raise issues around anonymity and confidentiality. Instead we draw on one of the projects that took a more pedestrian or safer approach; one which drew on examples from their respective lives and which could comfortably be introduced and discussed in front of the class as a whole.

Taking a 'then' and 'now' approach, the overarching themes of Group 1, charted the group's 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'.

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 'three 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 assess-

ments was the one that appeared 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 58 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 experienced 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.
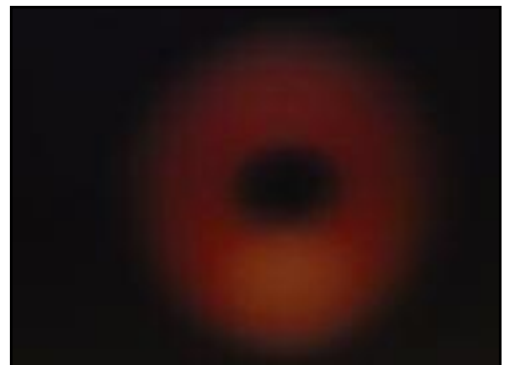
This angry abstract image evoked the comment,

'with no clear edges it's difficult to control, circular it grips the whole person… the red, however, is not uniform 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.

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 grouped 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. That is, they were responsible for providing and interpreting the data set. 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: Tutor 1 largely from a quantitative background, while Tutor 2 from a qualitative ethnographic background. Necessarily our approaches were different, Tutor 1 was apprehensive and unfamiliar with qualitative research while Tutor 2, 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 Tutor 1 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 Tutor 2 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, 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 institution and the ethics board within the psychology department; all topics were agreed with the respective student 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 nine groups produced work of high quality and all said they enjoyed the process. While many of the groups divulged details of a personal nature, two 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 Tutor 2 pertinently highlights,

'these were not first-year students, they were Master's 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. This added to the value of the method, as CAP encapsulates experience that goes beyond the words, adding to the deeper learning experience of the students. 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.

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, demonstrating the added depth that can be gained from considering different ways in which the voice of the participant can be heard. The creative element of this project allowed the students experience the process and engage fully with the topic, in a way that they perhaps would not have done through a more conventional interview-based project. 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.

Acknowledgements

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