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Visual elicitation in interviews

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## **Visual Elicitation in Interviews**

The use of visuals as stimuli for individuals to disclose their views and feelings has a long history in psychological research. In the social sciences the method was primarily known as ‘photo-elicitation’, though in fact many types of images and visual artefacts can be used besides photographs (moving images, paintings or drawings, objects etc.). Therefore it is more appropriate to use the more generic term ‘visual elicitation’ (Pauwels, 2015). The interview may make use of visual materials that originate from a variety of sources: pre-existing ‘societal artefacts (historic or archive pictures of cities, advertisements, 3D scale models, maps, objects etc.), as well as visual materials purposefully created by the researcher or even materials produced by the interviewees (in or outside a research context).

### **Using Visual Stimuli to Elicit Verbal Responses**

Exposing the interviewee (or multiple respondents in a focus group situation) to visual stimuli can yield two kinds of research data. First, researchers may obtain essential information about what is depicted or expressed in the visual materials. Well-informed respondents will often be able to tell (e.g. in the case of a recorded event in their neighborhood) precisely what is happening in the images, who the prime actors are, and what certain artefacts and symbols mean, or what the image maker might have missed.

More importantly the visual stimuli may also trigger the interviewees to speak about their deeper feelings or past experiences and reveal their positionality towards the subject under

study. Visual materials with the right ‘projective’ potential (open-ended, not too specific or detailed, yet relating broadly to the issue at hand) in combination with a competent interviewer and engaged interviewees may generate unique forms of verbal feedback or data that needs to be carefully analyzed as multilayered expressions.

The opportunity to elicit crucial information (factual information but also lived experiences, world views, beliefs) in interviews through the use of visuals has been emphasized by many social scientists. Talking about anthropological filmmaking Krebs (1975: 284) asserted long ago that *‘if the film elicitation technique is employed skillfully, the researcher may obtain some of the most exciting data of anthropology – how members conceptualize and structure the world in which they live’*. Collier (1967: 49) goes even further, by stating that *‘methodologically, the only way we can use the full record of the camera is through the projective interpretation by the native [sic]’*. Making sense of visuals will indeed often necessitate involving and combining both emic and etic perspectives.

The visual elicitation interview definitely has a number of unique advantages when compared to the purely verbal interview. Visual materials usually make it much easier to engage respondents for an interview, in particular when they have a connection with the immediate environment or situation of the participants. The respondents feel less intimidated by the research setting when they can freely comment on images rather than being subjected to a series of prefabricated questions. Well-chosen visuals seem to ask their own questions to the respondents and thus provide a hidden structure to the interview. They also are able to retain the attention of respondents much longer than direct questions in a purely verbal interview (Collier, 1967: 48). When certain images don’t yield any useful information or cause the respondent to move away from the issue at hand, then the researcher can flip over to the next one. Researchers can never fully anticipate what the visuals will trigger with their respondents, which is both a challenge and a unique trait of this method. An important factor

of its attractiveness for participants is the way in which the typical hierarchical role between the researcher and the researched seems to be somewhat reversed: the respondents act as informants who know more than the interviewer about the depicted matter. This move towards an 'expert role' may cause them to speak more freely. The fact that they are speaking about the images (or at least departing from them) makes them less inhibited, since they are just commenting upon 'what is already objectively recorded'. Obviously, from an ethics point of view, researchers should be very careful about using such spontaneously acquired information of a potentially sensible nature, especially when it can be traced back to its author and generate potential harm.

In addition to the mitigation or even reversal of the researcher/researched hierarchy whereby the respondent gets to fulfil the role of 'knowledgeable' informant or even expert rather than a mere 'object of interrogation', the attraction of visual interviewing for both researcher and researched can also be partly explained by the poly-semic character and engaging nature of the stimulus.

However the success of the visual interview or image elicitation process remains contingent on resolving methodological issues tied to conducting the interview and selecting the materials. Badly chosen visual materials may warp the research process by being unrelated to the issue studied, by being less appropriate (e.g. offensive or unconnected) for the selected respondents or by generating an all too implying, or skewed representation of the matter. The researchers themselves also need to be well-trained to be able to conduct the interview in a considerate and effective way. They need to be knowledgeable of the visual materials they are using, its provenance and research affordances, as well as be fully aware of the cultural sensitivities of the interviewees.

Even if the visual material used by the interviewers has been collected and produced with the greatest possible care, interviewers need to avoid suggesting interpretations that ignore the

conceptual frameworks of the respondents. Both Krebs (1975: 297) and Wagner (1979: 91) believe that this specific problem can be resolved by avoiding naming (or interpreting) depicted phenomena and by posing open questions (“What’s happening here?”, “What’s that?”, “Tell me about...”). Also researchers should be well-versed in conducting these kinds of less directive interviews and be attentive to unexpected but meaningful verbal and nonverbal cues from the respondent. The information and significance that respondents find in the image cannot be approached in a strictly standardized manner. By always remaining alert for respondents’ reactions to the visual material, and by adopting a flexible attitude towards unpredictable turns, one can often collect the most significant information. Preferably, the interviewer will try to retain control over the pace at which the images are shown, so that the respondents don’t just skip images that are potentially important, or elaborate and linger on aspects of minor importance.

Many types of visuals (in terms of origin or nature) can be used as interview stimuli, but not every set of visuals will ‘work’ to trigger the desired reactions. Researchers should be able to assemble a set (based on prior testing) that prompts reactions to the pursued focus (the subject or theme at hand), and avoids eliciting responses that are completely off-topic. Attention should be paid to both content and style (the ‘what’ and ‘how’: what is the effect of particular formal choices e.g. color, framing, angle of view etc. with respect to the depicting of the subject matter). The visual materials selected as interview prompts should be able to raise and retain the respondents’ interest and cooperation but if these are too explicit or obvious this will lower their projective potential. Not all material will have the same ‘elicitation’ potential for all respondents and the outcome will often remain fairly unpredictable.

As part of a focus group setting, using visuals may hold particular challenges and opportunities in terms of the willingness of the respondents to disclose their reactions in a less secluded session and the prospects of being able to build on other people’s reactions. People

may be more inhibited to disclose very personal responses to a visual stimulus in a group, but the interactions in the group may stimulate and feed group members to provide richer responses. Visual researchers should be able to assess which approach (one-to-one interviews or focus groups) is preferable to obtain the desired outcome.

## **Intersections with other participatory visual methods**

While visual interviewing or elicitation usually involves stimuli selected or produced by the researcher, the term has gradually expanded to include interviews that depart from images produced by the research subjects in response to an assignment by the researcher (e.g. ‘make ten images of what you particularly (dis)like in your neighborhood’). These approaches are known under names like ‘*auto-driven photo elicitation*’ (Clark, 1999) or ‘*respondent-controlled photo elicitation*’ (Padgett et al., 2013). Both terms, however, are somewhat misleading since they tend to mask the fact they in essence are more leaning towards ‘Respondent-generated image production’ (RGIP) as a distinct research method, whereby the researcher will scrutinize this visual output from the respondents as primary data (and ask the makers of the images for further verbal explanation). Moreover, researchers using these approaches often tend to work primarily with the verbal responses of the research subjects/image producers and don’t fully explore the visual data from an ‘etic’ perspective. Another crucial distinction between a standard visual elicitation (using a set of stimuli selected by the researcher) and the above mentioned ‘mergers’ of visual elicitation and RGIP are the differences in the projective potential of the materials (unexpected stimuli from a variety of sources and temporalities versus self-produced images of the immediate life world)



and the ‘expert role’ that respondents can take in a visual interview based on images that the respondent have made themselves shortly before.



**Figure 1** Twin Rivers Visual Stimulus n°5. **Figure 2.** Twin Rivers Visual Stimulus n°13. Jon Wagner used the photo elicitation approach as part of a larger study about the physical and social features of ‘Twin Rivers’ a planned housing development project located about an hour from New York City. The two images above belong to a series of 17 photographs, depicting different aspects of the newly ‘constructed’ community. This set of visual stimuli was used ‘to explore resident perceptions of this community in-the-process-of-becoming’ (Wagner, 1979: 87) This included both their familiarity with aspects of the prefabricated environment and individual preferences and needs. Wagner (1979) sees photo elicitation as a powerful “vehicle for asking these questions without suggesting response categories” (p. 86). The conducted visual interviews among the residents indeed yielded a number of valuable insights as to why this pre-fabricated community failed to meet the expectations of its inhabitants and why many of them left.

## **‘Picture-sorting’ as a particular form of visual elicitation**

While visual elicitation set ups typically generate *verbal* responses to visual stimuli, a particular technique, known as ‘picture sorting’ initially does not generate a ‘verbal’ but a ‘visible’ response to an assignment, materializing in a selection and arrangement of a given set of visual materials (which most often afterwards are being discussed). Research participants thus ‘respond’ to an assignment (called a ‘sorting task’, like e.g. pick out ten photos of politicians that look trustworthy to you and rank them) in a ‘visually observable’ manner. Sorting tasks can comprise of selecting images, putting them in groups or pairs, putting them in a certain order, labelling them etc. In its pure form picture sorting yields a visible output (that may be recorded by the researcher and thus become a visual artefact): a series of images ordered as a response to a research assignment, thus circumventing the need for clear rationalizations of explanations from the respondent who can react to the assignment in an intuitive or subconscious manner. It proves to be fairly easy to engage participants for a picture sorting exercise since the task at hand, working with images in a ‘silent way’, seems to make it much more enjoyable than answering questions and filling out forms.

Of course this leaves the researcher with the difficult task to try make sense of these ‘mute’ sortings as prime data which are presumably grounded in unuttered convictions and value systems of the respondents. Therefore, many research set ups which make use of picture sorting do opt for some sort of verbal elucidation afterwards. Such ‘post-sorting interviews’ (which then start to resemble photo elicitation interviews) obviously help the researcher further to interpret the results, but they should not simply replace a meticulous study of the visual output.

Picture sorting can be considered as a method which shares characteristics from both ‘visual elicitation’ (in that research subjects respond to visual stimuli, be it through a visual arrangement and not verbally) and ‘respondent generated image production’ which is

described elsewhere (and which implies that the research subjects are asked to respond with self-produced visuals). Obviously the ‘visual response’ in picture sorting set ups does not involve self-made images but just a visual construction made out of materials supplied by the researcher.

Picture sorting methods have been used with good results in political communication research as well as in marketing research. For example, in their study on respondent’s perceptions of images of politicians, Lobinger and Brantner asked the participants to arrange a set of 33 pictures from being very unfavorable (-4) to very favorable (+4) depictions.

(Lobinger & Brantner, 2016, p. 51) thus shedding light on how important the ‘looks’ of politicians are in establishing their trustworthiness and competence.

Lobinger and Brantner (forthcoming, 2019) further clarify that there are distinct varieties of sorting techniques, differentiated by such things as ‘the openness of the procedure, the sorting task or the character of categories’. Open sorting set ups, for example allow the respondent to develop their own categories and criteria while closed sorting set ups require them to use predefined categories or labels. Lobinger and Brantner (2019) also recommend to observe and document the *process* of picture sorting not just the end result: comments and reactions of participants, the time it took them to complete the task, how often they changed the position of an item etc.

## **Working towards best practices**

Today, different technologies (e.g. tablets, smartphones, netbooks, skype) can be used to present visual stimuli to the respondent in manners that improve the chances for a productive interview. Visual elicitation, ranks among the most popular visual research methods, and is

being applied productively in a variety of scholarly and professional settings to address an equally varied set of issues.

While applied ubiquitously, it is unfortunate that few of those many practical experiences of researchers get looped back into the development of a more refined and differentiated methodological understanding of this seemingly straightforward method. It would, however, be very helpful to systematically document, investigate and integrate these varied experiences which comprise amongst others:

- Experiences with different media types and technologies used (e.g. photographs, film, drawings, paintings, etc. and their material support: paper-based visuals, tablets, via skype,..).
- Experiences with different ways of conducting the interview (one-on-one or focus group, interviewing style, types of questions that work well to keep the interview on track in a non-directive way).
- The effects of provenance of the visual materials: experiences with different types of found images, researcher-produced, respondent-produced, ...
- The effects of different types of visual content: specific-general, explicit-implicit, shocking/provocative or conventional/reassuring, realist or metaphorical?
- The effects of style/formal variation: aesthetical choices re use of color, framing, shot types, documentary versus artistic styles, etc.).
- Experiences with construing and testing a workable set of visuals suited for a particular problematic and with projective capabilities.
- Experiences with different ways to analyze the outcome of visual interviews.
- Experiences with different ways of processing and presenting the results.

The systematic inventory and integration of findings related to aspects such as those listed above, could open even more promising outlooks for visual elicitation methods and related participatory visual approaches. A more reflexive attitude when documenting methodological aspects by practitioners of this method (researchers, community workers and professionals of different fields) would be key in this venture. Above all it would help researchers new to these methods to make better informed decisions about the many aspects that make up an effective application of these methods.

## **Further readings**

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