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This paper discusses the use of photographs as a means of eliciting narrative accounts in an interview setting. A number of different methods have been developed with the specific intention of eliciting narrative accounts in interviews (see for example, Flick, 1995; Riemann and Schutze, 1987; McAdams, 1993). However, there is no doubt that enabling people to provide narrative accounts can often be somewhat problematic (Flick, 1998). Over and above the problems encountered with the use of a specific method there is an inherent power differential present in any interview situation. This paper will argue that photo-assisted interviews can go some way to reducing the power imbalance present in traditional interview settings and thereby empower research participants. In addition, photo-assisted interviews are an interesting and effective way of generating narrative accounts. Data collected during a research project exploring the construction of identity during the transition to university will be used to illustrate some of the points made.

Introduction

Mishler (1986) argues that an interview is a socially situated activity. It is a joint production consisting of the 'talk' of the interviewer and the 'talk' of the interviewee. Mishler (1986) contrasts this view with what he refers to as the 'traditional approach to interviews' where every attempt is made to ensure that every participant receives the same questions. He argues that this traditional approach to interviewing is inappropriate in situations where the aim of the research is to develop a better understanding of the way in which people make sense of their world. Mishler (1986) identifies two major areas that are problematic in interviews. The first concerns the form of the questions and who asks them. There is no doubt that the answers generated in an interview situation depends on the way in which the question is formulated and are also influenced by the person asking the question. Factors such as the age, appearance, sex, and ethnic background of the interviewer are likely to have an impact on the answers given in an interview. This might seem to be a rather basic and somewhat simplistic point to make but it would appear that these issues have been somewhat neglected in the development of qualitative research methods. The second issue that Mishler (1986) identifies concerns the

nature of power in interview settings. In traditional approaches to interviewing there is a marked power differential between the interviewer and the interviewee. One of Mishler's (1986) concerns is the empowerment of the interviewee. Consequently, he sees one of the main tasks confronting qualitative researchers is the search for ways to empower research participants in such a way that they have more control over the process through which their words are used and interpreted.

The Use of Visual Methods in Social Science Research

The use of visual images in social science research has a long history. Photography was used widely by anthropologists towards the end of the 19th century as a means of recording visual information about different ethnic groups (Edwards, 1992). Although interest in the use of photography waned in the first couple of decades of the 20th century it was revitalised by the work of Bateson and Mead on Balinese culture (Bateson and Mead, 1942). Since then photography has been used in a variety of ways by social science researchers. Harper (2000) suggests that there are four different research strategies in which photos can be used, empirical, visual narratives, photo-elicitation and phenomenological mode. Within the empirical paradigm the photo is seen as a record of the subject at a particular moment in time. In this way the photo can be used to provide some evidence of normative behaviour and the occurrences of daily life. Although Harper considers the images to be empirical data he points out that the images do not represent 'objective truth'. The process of observing is interpretative, not least because the person taking the picture selects the point of view and subject. This means that any analysis which is carried out on the images reflects the decisions taken by the person who took the original photo. These decisions also include technical ones such as shutter speed etc which can have a dramatic effect on the final image as well as the decisions related to content. The concept of empirical data in a single image can be expanded to include a sequence of images which form the basis for a visual narrative. Although this type of research has been carried out using sequences of photos (Smith and Smith, 1975; Klich, 1989) it is likely that video would provide data that is more meaningful. Harper (2000) argues that photo elicitation is an underutilized qualitative method. The basic technique involves presenting participants with an image, or set of images, to elicit their explanations. For example, if we are interested in the role of the student coffee bar in developing friendship patterns during the first year at university we could ask a participant a question or series of questions aimed at eliciting that kind of information. An alternative approach would be to present the participant with an image or series of images of the student coffee bar to elicit their understandings of that context. In photo-elicitation research photos are not seen as being an objective record of events or situations. The role of the photo

is to provide a means by which the subjective experience of people can be explored in some detail. Harper (2000) argues that ‘photographs express the artistic, emotional, or experiential intent of the photographer’ (p.727). In the phenomenological mode the focus is on the meanings and experiences of the photographer as they are expressed through the photos they have taken. One of the problems here is the extent to which experience can be captured using static images. Harper (2000) uses the example drawn from his own experiences of taking photos from his bicycle in Bologna. The experience of riding his bicycle was an exciting and exhilarating experience. He argues that the static images produced do not reflect his actual experience of riding the bicycle through the busy streets of Bologna.

Figure 1 Alternative Ways of Using Photographs in Social Science Research

		Photographer	
		Researcher	Participant
Intended use of photographs	As representation for analysis	A	B
	To elicit subjective accounts	C	D

One of the ways of categorising the different ways in which photographs have been used in social science research is to use two dimensions. The first dimension indicates who was responsible for taking the photograph, the researcher or the participant. The second dimension is concerned with the way in which the photographs will be used. They can either be treated as a representation in their own right and analysed using some form of content analysis or they can be used to elicit information in an interview setting (Figure 1). The latter is usually referred to as a ‘photo-assisted interview’ (Ziller, 1990).

The work of anthropologists in the early part of the 20th century (see for example, Bateson and Mead, 1942) used photographs as a way of communication information about another culture. This is a realist approach in which the researcher decides what is important and takes the photographs. This work formed the basis for the development of visual sociology in the 1970s (see for example Becker, 1974). Here the photographs are taken by the researcher and are then interpreted and analysed (Box A Figure 1). Ziller (1990) reported several research projects in which he and colleagues enabled participants to take their own photographs (Box B Figure 1). Most of the research was concerned with exploring issues of self and identity. In one study

Ziller (1990) was interested in exploring the concept 'woman'. Male and female participants were given cameras and asked to take photographs which best described 'woman' from their point of view. The photographs were analysed using content analysis which indicated that women (in contrast to men) view themselves as more socially oriented and more activity oriented (Ziller, 1990). Although this use of photographs does empower participants by giving them control over the content of their photographs, their interpretation still rests with the researcher. Nielsen (1964) provides an early example research which enables participants to provide their own interpretation of visual images. Nielsen (1964) took video recordings and then played them back to the participants to elicit their interpretations of the behaviour. Harper (2000) describes a study in which he took photographs of an Italian street. The photographs were then shown to a participant in order to elicit their understanding of Italian street life (Box C Figure 1). Using this approach it enables participants to express their understanding of settings which are of interest to the researcher. Nevertheless, the researcher retains control over the nature of the photographs. The final category involves enabling participants to take their photographs and then interpreting them for the researcher (Box D Figure 1). In this approach the photographs taken by the participants form the basis for a photo-assisted interview. This technique is described by Ziller (1990). Essentially photo-assisted interviews are a variation of open-ended interviewing where the assumption is made that the researcher will ask questions that are meaningful to the participant.

When we are taking photographs the social position of photographer and subject ensure that the image is a social construction which reflects power differentials (Harper, 2000). Inspection of the majority of family photograph albums will provide examples of the way in which power differentials can influence the nature of photographs taken. Parents frequently take photographs of children in ridiculous poses, but there are usually very few photos of parents arguing or having a bath. Children rarely have the social power to take photographs of this kind. Harper (2000) uses an example drawn from his own research of photographs taken by men and women to highlight the gendered nature of photography. He was interested in dairy farming in the northeastern USA during World War 2 and compared photos taken by men and women. The photos taken by male photographers did not include women as productive members of the farm. Talking about situations where the photographs are taken by the researcher Harper (2000) states, 'We need to acknowledge that photography embodies the unequal relationships that are part of most research activities' (p.728).

The Research Context

The researcher, myself, is an academic member of staff in a university psychology department. The participants were students studying in the same department and they were aware of my position within the department. They agreed to complete diaries for a four week period including their first couple of weeks at university and also to take part in two interviews. The first of these took place towards the end of the first semester. It was during these interviews that I became increasingly aware of the power differentials that were inherent in the situation. The interviews themselves went well, the participants appeared to be comfortable answering the questions that I put to them. It was me, the researcher, who was becoming increasingly uneasy about my own role in the research process. This unease, together with the influence of Mishler's work, meant that I was determined that the second interviews would be conducted in a manner that went some way towards empowering the participants. Fortunately for me serendipity played a helping hand in the form of paper presented by Professor Barbara Harrison at a workshop (Harrison, 2001) in which she talked about the use of visual methods in research. This provided me with the enthusiasm to explore the potential role that photography could play in my own research.

Using Photo-Assisted Interviews with First Year University Students

Participants were provided with disposable cameras and were asked to take pictures of objects, places, people, pets, etc. that had been significant during their first year at university. All eleven participants took pictures and returned the cameras. The interviews consisted of presenting each of the photographs in turn and asking the participant to 'tell me about the photograph'.

In order to illustrate the type of photographs taken and the accounts given I have selected three examples taken from the same participant.

The first photograph is one of a young woman in a work setting. The participant, whom I shall call Claire, describes the relationship she has with the young woman who is one of her colleagues at work.

Photograph 1 A Young Woman

- P That's who I work with erm I've worked with her for about a year. That's just somebody who's been really important because she's she's only 17 so she's younger than what I am, but she's going through her GSCEs and I've kinda like been a mother figure to her and she's had quite a lot of problems (*really*) sort of psychologically and emotionally (*yeh yeah*) so she's been really good to talk to. She's sort of come to me to talk. So I've got a lot of sort of perspective from her (*yeh*) sort of outlook on things. She's been really good ...

- I* So that's somebody who you've been working with - so you've been acting as kind of a mother figure to her.
- P* Yeh she really looks up to me mmm she's sort of into ... she's gone into psychology at the moment. So she's looked up to me in that way as well.
- I* How does that kind of make you feel?
- P* Mmm OK 'cos hopefully I know what I'm talking about! (Laughs). I think a lot of the things that have happened in her background are what happened in my background and my past that hang ... erhm I would say I'm a survivor of sort of childhood experiences. Whereas she was just coming through that part (*right*) and I'd already done it so it was quite nice for somebody to look up to me in that way. (*yeh*) So I think she saw me as a bit of a role model ...

This extract illustrates a theme that emerged in both the semi-structured interview and the photo-assisted interview. Claire uses the 'mother-child' metaphor extensively when she is talking about relationships. She positions herself in relationships as either 'caregiver' or 'dependent'. In her relationship with her friend she positions herself as the 'role model' and the caregiver. Her role in this relationship is to provide support and guidance for her younger friend. This account is interesting because it is consistent with information that has emerged in data collected on previous occasions through Claire's diary and her semi-structured interview. The theoretical underpinnings of the research meant that one of the issues I explored during the semi-structured interview was relationships with friends and significant others. So it could be argued that in this case the photograph and Claire's account have added little to my understanding of Claire's experiences during the first year at university.

The second photograph was a picture of a baby's pram. When I conducted the photo-assisted interview with Claire she was about eight months pregnant.

Photograph 2 A Pram

- P* That's baby's pram (laughs) I couldn't take a photo of the baby so I took a photo of the baby's pram (laughs).
- I* How many months...
- P* I've got 3 weeks to go
- I* Gosh you don't look that big!
- P* Yeh nice and small - well I am but he's not! (Laughs). But it was a shock because I was told I couldn't have children (*really*) erhm and I was supposed to have an operation when I found out that I was pregnant. The day that I went in for the operation I found out that I was pregnant (*right*). So there's been all sorts of complications and I've had to have a section erhm so it's kind of jumped in on me really. 'Cos I would have never have had a child when I was at university. So that was a big decision to make then whether to carry on with university or take a year out (*yeh*). Quite a lot of big decisions

- had to be made. (*yeh*) so as soon as I found out ... I was worried if I could carry to full term and things like that ... so it's been difficult (laughs)
- I* I can imagine. It must have been an amazing shock if you think you can't have children and all of a sudden ...
- P* Gosh I didn't know what to think ... I just ... I sat and cried because I didn't want it to happen then ... but I did want it to happen because I never thought it would. So it was a really ... a really big shock (laughs) I sort of didn't know how to feel erm ...
- I* So you only found out when you had gone into hospital for an operation?
- P* Yeh I went in on the morning for the operation - sort of got ready and then they just did a routine pregnancy test (*yeh*) just to check (laughs) and found out that I was (laughs) ...
- I* How did they break that to you?
- P* Erm I think the ... consultant was quite gobsmacked as well (laughs) because all the tests that had come he'd sort of stated that ... you know it would be relatively slim chance of me getting pregnant. So it was quite a shock to her as well (*mmm I can imagine*) (laughs) ...
- I* So ... what happened then? Because you were saying that you were a bit gobsmacked and upset.
- P* Mmm Yeh yeh I burst out crying ... I think I was like on my own for an hour in a room ... because it was morning ... it was when it was really bad snowing (*right*) erhm so my partner couldn't come and pick me up straight away. Because he couldn't get through (*yeh*) so I had that hour to sit and start crying to myself so ... that was really strange (*mmm*) and having to break it to him as well.

Claire continued to describe this experience at length. This is clearly a significant event in Claire's life that goes on to highlight issues about the way in which university life and personal life are intertwined. For the purposes of this paper the interesting aspect of this photograph and Claire's account is that it is extremely unlikely that this would have emerged through a semi-structured interview driven by my own theoretical interests. Yet the way in which Claire narrates this particular experience provides information that is extremely relevant to the aims of the research.

The third photograph was of the door of a member of academic staff's office.

Photograph 3 A Lecturer's Door with Name Plate

- I* OK and here we've number 19 a door
- P* It's (lecturer's name) erhm cos I didn't want to get a photo of him (laughs) so I just took one of his door plaque. Erhm he's been really big because erhm he's the person I went to talk about the pregnancy and to defer. I deferred an essay and a report erhm and that helped with my exams because I knew I was going through a bad time at that time erhm and he was really good and he sat

me down and he was really good at listening. Quite strange compared with my other tutors because they didn't have the time. So it was really nice erhm ... he was very open and erhm you could talk to him quite easily.

This photograph and Claire's account illustrate the power differentials inherent in this particular social setting. Claire has clearly established a good relationship with this member of staff. She has discussed her personal life and problems with him and yet she is unable to ask him if she can take his photograph. I suspect that the lecturer concerned would be somewhat surprised by Claire's unwillingness to ask for a photograph.

Concluding Comments

The three photographs I have discussed in this paper were selected to illustrate some of the issues that confront social scientists using interviews to collect data. Some of the data that emerged from the photo-assisted interviews was consistent with data collected during semi-structured interviews. But on other occasions the information given and topics covered were unexpected, highlighting one of the important advantages of shifting the interview agenda to the participant. Power differentials are present throughout the whole process of conducting social science research. In this paper I have briefly discussed power differentials in interview settings but questions of power extend far beyond such local settings. For example, Claire's decision to take picture of a door rather than approach a lecturer suggests not only in research but also in our day-to-day work as academics we are often unaware of the way in which power manifests itself. I would argue that the use of photo-assisted interviews is one way of reducing the power differential in interview settings and goes some way towards empowering the research participants. In the research I have discussed in this chapter initial comparisons between the semi-structured interviews and the photo-assisted interviews would appear to support the view that the photo-assisted interviews are an effective means of enabling people to provide narrative accounts of their own lives. In the semi-structured interviews participants were much more likely to express their views, attitudes and beliefs about particular topics or provide a generalised and abstract account of their experiences rather than provide a narrative account. Enabling participants to narrate their experiences lies at the heart of narrative research, but some participants appear to find it more difficult than others to do this (Flick, 1998). Photo-assisted interviews create a social setting in which even those people who find it difficult to narrate their lives are likely to provide a narrative account of their experiences. One final point, the nature of photo-assisted interviews means that the outcome invariably consists of several delimited narratives that can cover quite disparate aspects of a person's life. For many

research questions this is entirely appropriate and can provide a wealth of interesting information, but other research questions might be less well suited to this particular method.

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