- In comparison with other methods little has been written about how photographs can be useful for interviewing purposes.
- Nevertheless, photo-interviews have been used successfully for cultural studies and have been employed across a wide variety of disciplines and topics.
- Over time various terms have become associated with the technique such as photo-elicitation, autodriving, reflexive photography, photo novella and photovoice.
- Such techniques provide many advantages for the researcher.

Photo-Interviewing for research

Rosalind Hurworth

Over the last century, the use of photographs for social science purposes has waxed and waned. It has swung from being popular to being ignored but in the past decade, there has been a considerable renewal of interest (Walker, 1993, Hurworth & Sweeney 1995, Prosser 1996, Banks 1995, 2001, Emmison et al. 2001, Rose 2001).

Even so, in comparison with other data collection methods, only a relatively small amount has been written concerning the use of the visual medium for research, and even less about how photographs can be integrated into the interviewing process. This issue therefore attempts tries to redress the situation by reviewing the use of photo-interviewing, outlining how associated terminology has varied and the advantages of this method.

Photo Interviewing and Photo Elicitation

Photo-interviewing was certainly used in early anthropological research. Franz Boas, for instance, was one of the first to use such a technique while studying the culture of the Tobriand Islands. During fieldwork he would show photos to key informants in order to get them to talk about specific rituals.

This use of photographs to provoke a response, became known as **photo-elicitation** (Harper 1984, Heisley and Levy 1991). The Colliers (two eminent proponents of the visual medium for research, 1979, 1986) found that photos

used in this way were invaluable as:

> Picture interviews were flooded with encyclopaedic community information whereas in the exclusively verbal interviews, communication difficulties and memory blocks inhibited the flow of information (Collier 1979:281).

Schwartz added that interviewees respond to photographs,

> without hesitation. By providing informants with a task similar to viewing a family album, the strangeness of the interview situation is averted (1989: 151-152).

Consequently, social scientists have employed photos successfully to extract information from people. For instance, photo-interviews have been used to examine: farmers' attitudes to modernisation (Gates 1976) and a particular farming community (Schwartz 1989). Then, Chiozzi (1989) used the technique to evaluate changes in a town, Hareven and Langenbach (1978) studied work in an American factory and Suchar and Rotenberg (1994) researched the 'meaning of shelter adequacy' associated with housing in an American neighbourhood.

Similarly, Modell and Brodsky (1994) provided archival photographs to evoke memories about a steel town. Interestingly, these researchers asked informants for accounts first, and only then to respond to the photos and lastly to discuss their own photographs of life in the area. This approach provided a means of verification

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and allowed the roles of researcher and subject to be reversed (Smith and Woodward 1999).

Photo-elicitation has also been used across other disciplines and topic areas in order to:

- determine ethnic identification (Gold 1986)
- understand behaviours (Entin 1979, Wessels 1985)
- enhance memory retrieval (Aschermann et al. 1998)
- work with young children/school students (Diamond 1996, Weiniger 1998, Foster et al. 1999, Salmon 2001)
- undertake programme evaluations (Brown et al. 1980, Tucker and Dempsey 1991, Buchanan 1998)
- provide a tool for nursing, medical and gerontological research (Hagedorn 1996, Higgins & Highley 1986, Magilvy et al. 1992)
- teach tertiary students (Killion 2001, Smith and Woodward 1999)
- talk about more difficult, abstract concepts (Curry and Strauss 1994, Bender et al. 2001)

Autodriving

Meanwhile, in the field of marketing, Heisley and Levy (1991) used photo interviewing to enhance informant involvement and to elicit information about consumer behaviour. However, the difference was that, instead of being presented with photos to comment upon, photos were taken by the interviewees themselves. This form of photo-elicitation was termed **autodriving** indicating that "the interview is 'driven' by informants who are seeing their own behaviour" (Heisley and Levy 1991:261) The study involved informants' photographs about their evening meals. The photos were used as stimuli but during interviews the complexities of family dynamics emerged. This allowed the authors and the interviewees to develop a "negotiated interpretation of consumption events" (257). It also provided a means to give

> the informant increased voice and authority in interpreting such events while … provid[ing] a perspective … that makes systems meaningful to an outsider. It also

manufactures distance for the informant so they see familiar data in unfamiliar ways (1991: 257).

Reflexive Photography

Also using photos taken by participants, Harrington & Lindy (1998) examined the perceptions of college freshmen. In this case ten students were given a disposable camera to take shots of their impressions of the university. This was followed by a reflective interview to discover reactions.

This technique has also been used to examine cross-cultural issues. Ziller (1990), for instance, describes how students from four nationalities were asked to take photos depicting what the USA meant to them and then to talk about it. Their photographs were quite different from those taken by American-born students. In another cross-cultural study, Douglas (1998) asked black students to present their impressions of a predominantly white university and referred to the photos produced for subsequent interviews as **reflexive photos**. Interestingly, participants reported this technique promoted deeper levels of reflective thinking than interviews alone would have done.

Then recently, Berman et al. (2001) studied recently-arrived refugee Bosnian children, aged 11-14, in Canada. Participants were given disposable cameras and asked to take pictures of people, places and events. The meanings of the photographs were then explored in later interviews.

Photo Novella

Meanwhile, another form of photo-interviewing has been referred to as **photo novella** meaning 'picture stories'. This time photographs are used to encourage participants to talk about day-to-day routines and events (Wang and Burris 1994). As with reflexive photography, cameras are not entrusted to researchers or professional photographers but rather given to children, the elderly or other marginalised groups in order to discuss life as they see it.

A key component of the photo novella process is dialogue where participants show their photographs and talk about their significance and meaning. This grounding of the images in real experience is the key

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and makes the photographs infinitely more valuable than a set of images created by outsiders. Consequently, photo novella is meant to be a tool of empowerment enabling those with little money, power or status to communicate to policymakers where change should occur. An example of this approach was reported by Wang, Burris and Xiang (1996) who used the technique with rural women in China to inform and influence improvements in women's health.

Photovoice

Most recently the term **photovoice** has been used instead of 'photo novella'. This has been promoted strongly by Wang and Burris (1997) who describe it a as process by which 'people can identify, represent and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique'. Wang (1999) and Wang et al. (2000) also suggest that it can be used for participatory action research whereby people create and discuss photographs as a means of enabling personal and community change. Therefore, it can also be used for participatory needs assessments and health promotion (Wang et al. 1996a, 1996b).

Photovoice has three goals which are to:

• enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns

• promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs

• reach policy makers.

In one particular example, Killion and Wang (2000) used the approach with young, homeless African American women and low-income elderly African American women who had difficulty maintaining their houses. An intergenerational study was undertaken where photos were discussed that focused on their current living arrangements. Although the women spanned three generations, had different life experiences and resided in a variety of home settings, the sharing of photographs revealed many commonalities. In the process the women established mutual respect and built alliances.

Advantages of Photo-Interviewing

While some limitations exist (including ethical, privacy, sampling and validity issues raised by authors such as Becker 1978, Templin 1982, Blyton 1987, Fang and Elwein 1990, Wang 2001), we have seen that photo-interviewing in its various forms can be a particularly powerful tool for the researcher. It can challenge participants, provide nuances, trigger memories, lead to new perspectives and explanations, and help to avoid researcher misinterpretation. In addition, the technique can:

• be used at any stage of the research

• provide a means of 'getting inside' a program and its context

• bridge psychological and physical realities

• allow the combination of visual and verbal language

• assist with building trust and rapport

• produce unpredictable information

• promote longer, more detailed interviews in comparison with verbal interviews

• provide a component of multi-methods triangulation to improve rigour

• form a core technique to enhance collaborative/participatory research and needs assessments

• be preferable to conventional interviews for many participants.

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