Using visual methods in research with young people

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Presentation outline

• Introduction: recent interest in visual methods
• Advantages of using visual methods with children and young people
• Graphic elicitation:
  • relational maps
  • timelines
• Creative and arts-based methods:
  • self-portrait
  • collage
Research projects

Examples from two studies:

• Narratives of Identity and Migration, PhD project (Cambridge, 2001) funded by EC Marie Curie Fellowship (1998-2000) investigating the process of identity construction in young people on the basis of a case study of migration

• Young Lives and Times, waves 1 and 2 funded by ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, Real Life Methods Node, 2005-2008 investigating young people’s relational worlds and their everyday lives and identities
Visual and sensory methods

- Social science privileges approaches based on words and on numbers, but we inhabit worlds that are made of other senses as well.

- Recent interest in going ‘beyond text’, and in designing sensory research methods (Back, 2007; Mason and Davies, 2009).

- Visual methods are not a novelty, but only recently their use has become more popular, especially in research with children and young people.
Communicating beyond words

• Not all knowledge can be reduced to language: visual images are evocative and may sometimes communicate what words cannot say (Eisner, 2008; Gauntlett, 2007)

• Images may allow access to different levels of consciousness, communicating more holistically and through metaphors (Prosser and Loxley, 2008)

• Ambiguities of images may be seen as a strength: they highlight multiple perspectives and are good for eliciting participants’ own responses
Types of visual data

- Found images
- Researcher-created images
- Participant-created images

- A range of visual media may be used in research: photographs, films and video, media images, drawings, maps, artwork, etc
Advantages of using visual methods with children and young people

• Engaging young people in research and encouraging their participation

• Relevant to young people’s own styles of expression and interest in images

• Creative tasks may help in sustaining interest and attention: consultative focus groups indicated that young people did not want to take part in a study that involved ‘just sitting and talking’ (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010)

• Good with people who may have difficulties in expressing themselves verbally, also very young children may be included
Graphic elicitation

• Elicitation using drawings, diagrams, maps. These drawings may be made by the researcher or by participants, in response to some basic ‘scaffolding’ instructions (Prosser and Loxley, 2008).

• A creative task that may encourage reflection and going beyond standardized ways of answering questions: it leaves time for participants to think (Gauntlett, 2007).
Relational maps: Carlie
Rebekah’s relational map
Benefits of graphic elicitation

- The graphic elicitation task helps participants thinking differently about issues and may help overcoming silence, eliciting information which would possibly have remained unknown otherwise.

- Editing graphic documents for anonymisation is straightforward.

However:

- Some tasks may not be inclusive.

- The instructions will be crucial in shaping participants’ understandings of the task – some instructions may inherently suggest an interpretation.

- The tasks are produced in an interview context and should be considered as part of the research interaction.
The self-portrait

- Narratives of Identity and Migration, PhD project (Cambridge, 2001) investigating the process of identity construction in young people on the basis of a case study of migration

- Adoption of visual methods for:
  - encouraging reflexivity
  - encouraging participation
  - getting to a holistic view of identities

Methodological interest in keeping instructions ‘open’

- Design of a diary-based mixed method approach which included the self-portrait
The self portrait: instructions

I would like you to show me on this paper who you are at this moment in life…

…and to add also the people and things that are important to you
Emma’s self-portrait
Johnny’s self-portrait
Advantages of using self-portraits

• Encouraging reflexivity

• ‘Ice breaker’ during the interview (Morrow, 1998)

• ‘Condensing effect’: evocative power of images

• Images could sometimes lead in the contextual interpretation of data, as in Johnny’s ‘crossroads’ example
Potential difficulties

- Openness of the method may be problematic for some participants: one young woman withdrew consent
- Mixing methods allows richness of data and the inclusion of a multiplicity of dimensions, but the analysis is not a straightforward process
- Openness of the approach and focus on the individual case might make it difficult to compare across different cases
Identities and collage

- Globalising forces are making young people’s aspirations similar in different parts of the world. Mixing of distant discourses, the local and the global. ‘Collage effect’ (Giddens, 1991) on identities.

- ‘Extended diary’ (Bagnoli, 2001) and pinboard (Slater, 1995): fluid contexts in which photographic and other images enter the territory of our daily lives, mixing with everyday objects.

- Fluid and in progress quality of identities – the collage may be an appropriate method for their representation.
Collage as a method

• In wave one of the Young Lives and Times study, after two rounds of interviews, the young people were given a booklet with a choice of eight different activities to get involved with.

• One of these activities was the collage. Instructions: ‘The collage should be a visual reflection of who you are and what you like, what and who is important to you now, as well as your history’.
Collage as a girls’ choice

• In wave 1 (winter 2006/spring 2007), collages were made by 5 girls, all of them middle class and aged 13/14. 4 of these girls attended the same girls’ public school.

• In wave 2 interviews (spring/summer 2008) I used the 5 collages as a visual elicitation tool. Girls were then aged 14/15.

• In March 2008 the collages were exhibited in an outreach event organised within the ESRC Festival of Social Science.

• What identity narratives emerged from the collages?

• Were the collages still relevant as a visual representation of the girls’ identities one year later?
Katie’s collage
Alicia’s collage
Meg’s collage
Grace’s collage
Chelsea’s collage
Collage as a representation of identities

• Three dimensional and sensory artwork

• Identity narratives
  relationships: friends, family, pets, imagined others
  leisure: partying with friends, sports, music, shopping
  changing female body: fashion, branding

• Young people’s visual cultures
  Barbie and girls’ magazines, digital technologies

• Change over time
  change in significant others and significant narratives
  distancing from younger self and ‘young girl’ identity
Collage: benefits and limitations

- Creative activity which encourages participation and engagement with the research
- Non-threatening and accessible
- Allowing a holistic expression of self
- Eliciting potential in longitudinal research

However:
- Unpopular with boys
- Anonymisation of photographs: is blurring a good solution?
- Renegotiating consent


