

FAQ 31: What are some good approaches to using creative visual research methods with children?

What's the issue?

In recent years, researchers from a wide range of disciplines, for example, sociology, psychology, media studies, social policy, education, and health, have shown a growing interest in making use of the new creative visual methods in social research. Such approaches have been especially popular while doing research involving children and young people. Participants in such studies are first asked to take the time to apply their playful and creative attention in making a visual (drawing, photo, video, collage) or three-dimensional artefact (out of clay, Lego, etc.), and later to reflect on it so as to provide new information and insight into different aspects of social life that might not be accessible with more traditional qualitative research methods, for example, interviews or focus groups.

Common practice

- In comparison with traditional research methods where research participants are asked to orally reflect on a variety of topics and hence to provide instant answers on complicated and sometimes very personal matters, creative processes take more time and thus also demand greater reflection on the part of the participant.
- Creative research approaches aim to generate a more collaborative mode to the whole research procedure. On the one hand, research participants have greater editorial control over their material as they can erase or modify their artefacts and thereby portray aspects important to them. On the other hand, researchers should not try to impose their own readings on the created artefacts, but rather give “voice” to the participants for interpreting and commenting on their work.
- Researchers should acknowledge that it is not possible to state beforehand what kind of data will be produced in a study involving creative methods.

Questions to consider

What are the additional qualities you intend to gain by using creative visual research methods? Are you ready to “go with the flow” and make quick changes to the initial plan as the situation unfolds? Are you seen as a person of authority to the children or teens? If yes, then pay great attention to the way questions are formulated, as fear of doing something “wrong” could inhibit participants’ creativity. How skilled are the participants expected to be in the creative processes? Are any special skills (e.g. Photoshop, video editing) needed for completing the tasks? How much time will the creative process demand, in your opinion? Do you find drawing and explaining (simultaneously or straight after) useful, or do you want to provide time for creative processes and give the participants a sense of perspective in relation to their creation?

Pitfalls to avoid

- Individuals have different levels of artistic skills and different levels of confidence, hence some participants may first feel a bit uneasy and more inhibited when asked to produce a creative artefact. Hence, you should at least try to offer a variety of choices that would allow the participants to exercise their agency and creativity to the fullest.
- It is important to take into account the main audience when presenting these creative assignments as students’ (un)conscious need to earn the approval of peers might still have an effect on their work and joint discussions that follow. Answering is a form of self-presentation and group affiliation is important for teenagers, so in many situations individual behaviours and attitudes could be sacrificed for group mentality, and norms and values imagined to be shared with others.
- Be aware of the fact that visuals created by children/young people may often contain stereotypes and may thus sometimes appear to be objectifying “others”. At the same time, they might also allow you to witness how participants relate to these “others” and position themselves. In fact, you should not fall victim to the belief that these images are self-explanatory and should not feel intimidated and uneasy when asking young children to provide interpretations of their own works. Furthermore, rather than focusing on WHAT they have

made, be more focused on finding out WHY they have decided to make such an artefact and WHAT the artefact meant for the maker.

- Do not only focus on the oral (or written) interpretations of the participants and the group and by doing so, dismiss the visual dimension of their study. Rather, search for additional theories and ways for understanding the data produced through creative methods.
- As the personal meanings and perceptions communicated through such an approach are often ambiguous, obscure, and ever changing, you cannot take the role of omniscient expert. Rather, be creative, much like the method. Giving participants plenty of options in the process of creation and accepting deviations from the original plan to follow interesting sub-topics are just a few aspects that can benefit the research.

Examples of a study using visual methods

Our experiences with creative visual methods suggest that such an approach helps to generate respondent curiosity and maintain their interest in the study procedure as children and young people sincerely take pleasure in the research process. Furthermore, as the participants can easily modify their creative works, they seemed to feel in control over their own process of expression and thereby also more at ease with the need to comment on their own experiences and perceptions.

When using creative methods (especially in research with teens), the moderator should be prepared to talk about material that could be considered provocative: researching the perceived persona of an online pervert (in-depth interviews combined with previously made individual drawings of online perverts) presented a situation where an interviewee had drawn a penis in detail. As the interviewee explained – it was partly tongue-in-cheek humour and partly his real perception. In addition, he had drawn a picture, more common to the standards of that sample, of a filthy-looking man on the other side of the paper, in case the drawing of a penis was ‘a bit too much’. Moderators of such studies should be prepared to give extra confirmation about the absence of ‘right’ answers in creative exercises.

The moderator can help the interviewees feel more comfortable and open up. In one study it was evident in many parts of the discussion when high school students were a bit reluctant to talk about certain things and behaviours. The moderator provided personal examples that offered a possibility to relate and feel more relaxed to talk about their own experiences, for instance, where participants described their normal web routines: Moderator: ‘In terms of time, how much time do you spend online every day? Or are you online every day?’/F5: ‘Oh, this is brutal, I’m afraid to say it.’/Moderator: ‘So that you won’t feel bad, I can tell you mine. I added my hours up and well ... on average I’m online for 12 hours per day...’/F5: ‘Okay, then mine really isn’t so bad...’. (Maria Murumaa-Mengel, Estonia)

References and further resources

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