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**“Beyond Words”: A researcher’s guide to using photo elicitation in psychology**

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### **Abstract**

The use of photo elicitation is limited within the field of psychology despite its theoretical and practical potential. It offers significant benefits as a qualitative method that could present a new and interesting way of exploring previously understood topics within the discipline. Within our discussions, we present a Step-by-Step guide in which we outline the key practical stages, as well as ethical assurances involved in photo elicitation research, using our ongoing research as an illustrative example. It is intended that this could be used as a model of good practice for developing research paradigms beyond those typically used within the psychology discipline.

**Keywords:** Photo elicitation; qualitative; interviews; psychology

## **Introduction**

Photo elicitation as a method of interviewing is simply the use of photos within an interview setting (Harper, 2002; Hogan, 2012). Using visual stimuli within interviewing has been found to alter the tone of the interview, with the potential to prompt emotional connections to memories, thus providing more meaningful accounts (Kunimoto, 2004). This method has been used to explore a number of research issues including the impact of physical setting of hospital wards on recovery (Radley and Taylor, 2003); adolescents orphaned by AIDS in South Africa (Thupayagale-Tshweneagae and Mokomane, 2012); agricultural farming (Beillin, 2005); women's experiences of chemotherapy (Frith and Harcourt, 2007) and the experiences of ironman competitors (Wakefield and Watt, 2012). It has been frequently used with children and young people, to explore issues including experiences of autism spectrum disorder (Hill, 2014); bullying (Walton and Niblett, 2013); grief (Stutey, Helm, LoSasso and Kreider, 2015) and consumerism and identity (Croghan, Griffin, Hunter and Phoenix, 2008).

Despite the popularity of it as a method within disciplines such as anthropology (e.g. Samuels, 2004) and sociology (e.g. Dowdall and Golden, 1989; Clark-Ibáñez, 2007), it remains an underutilised method within psychological research. With the current, widespread use and availability of visual technology and imagery (Rose, 2016), photo elicitation has immense promise as an innovative tool in research methodology. However, the prevailing lack of pragmatic guidance or indeed consensus in how this method is employed may be key reasons why other methods are favoured. Given these issues, we provide a practical account of photo elicitation methodology, drawing upon our ongoing research as an illustrative example, as well as discuss some of the associated challenges and opportunities. The intention is to inform best practice and offer a comprehensible guide for those wishing to incorporate the technique within their own psychological research.

### **Why choose photo elicitation in psychology?**

The use of qualitative methods within the discipline can be traced back to the birth of modern psychology (Wertz, 2014), but did not gain popularity until around the 1990s (Rennie, Watson and Monteiro, 2002). The domination of quantitative methods within the discipline apparently reflects a longstanding and pervasive positivist view within the field that the world and people's experiences can be reduced to universal laws and statistical relationships (Howitt, 2010). The traditional "methodological hierarchy" (Wertz, 2014; p. 13) has become outdated, with many social and research practices being questioned. With this rise in the popularity (Rennie, et al., 2002), there are a wealth of qualitative methods currently used. Interviews are one such way of gaining insight into people's experiences, the researcher asks open ended questions to which participants respond "using their own words" giving a personal account (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p. 79). Interviews are thought to be popular (semi-structured interviews in particular) for several reasons including their ease, flexibility and ability to gather rich data (Hugh-Jones and Gibson, 2012) as well as conforming to a style of social interaction that is thought to be largely culturally familiar (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997).

Indeed, the semi-structured interview is considered the dominant form of qualitative method within psychology (Braun and Clarke, 2013), and arguably provides an opportunity for insight into the psychological and social world of the participant (Smith and Osborn, 2007). Some scholars have suggested that interviews are over-utilised in psychology, which has largely been attributed to their perceived simplicity relative to other qualitative approaches such as analysing naturalistic records (Potter and Hepburn, 2005). However, 'over-use' is a somewhat unhelpful indictment perhaps instead the focus needs to be shifted to when and how to maximise their contribution. If greater attention were focused upon epistemological positioning, the nature of the research question and the ethical implications of the topic of study then we may have greater confidence in their role in robust research. By definition, semi-

structured interviews require researcher-led direction but the use of the prefix 'semi' does infer a level of flexibility and responsivity which may aid the development of rapport. Despite claims of enhanced rapport building the interview process remains largely under the control of the researcher (Sorrell and Redmond, 1995). Critical scholars are disparaging of claims that semi-structured interviews facilitate rapport building suggesting instead that what is actually being reflected is the participant's acceptance of the interviewer's goals and their attempts to provide appropriate information (Oakley, 1981). It is precisely this tension between researcher control and participant voice that the photo elicitation interview seeks to address.

By allowing the introduction of participant-driven photographs, or other visual stimuli, the researcher attempts to understand the experiences (including emotions, feelings, ideas) of the participants, rather than imposing their own framework or perception of a topic (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013). The purpose of the images would be to promote dialogue and potentially introduce new dimensions to the research that the researcher had not considered. As an activity photo-elicitation can create a "comfortable space for discussion" (Epstein, Stevens, McKeever and Baruhel, 2006; p 8) and involve participants in a way that does not limit responses which may be especially important for groups such as children.

By using photo elicitation within interviews, the researcher gains a "phenomenological sense" (Harper, 1986; p. 23) of what the content of the photos means to the participants; it allows people to share and define issues or concerns they have (Berg and Lune, 2013). As a method, it was first used by Collier (1957) whilst examining mental health in changing Canadian communities; it made it possible for the research team to challenge their previous assumptions about the communities. Within photo elicitation, photos (taken by either the researchers or the participant) are used as a stimulus to elicit richer accounts of the topic or phenomena under study (Frith and Harcourt, 2007). Photos have also been suggested to keep

the interview stimulating and can help keep the interview structured but not repetitive (Collier, 1957).

The use of photos in the interview setting is not just to steer the discussion, but to also stimulate memory in a way that standardised questions may not. The difference between interviews solely reliant on words and those including pictures is thought to be around the way people respond to these two forms of symbolic representation; images are thought to connect with a deeper sense of the human consciousness than words (Harper, 2002). Researchers have claimed that the photo-elicitation technique has a number of benefits, including: an increase in participant-led dialogue producing rich data (Meo, 2010), the elicitation of data that in some cases has challenged traditional explanations of the phenomenon of interest (Hurworth, 2003) and the facilitation of rapport building (Collier, 1957).

Indeed, our own ongoing research which uses photo-elicitation to explore university students' experiences highlights the utility of this method, particularly for providing a "student-centred" approach to understand student satisfaction (Bates, Kaye and McCann, 2017). That is, whilst it is typical for the phenomenon of student satisfaction to be largely understood by Nationally-derived metrics such as the National Student Survey (NSS) within UK Higher Education, we question the extent to which this captures all aspects of students' experiences which are important to their satisfaction at university. As such, photo-elicitation provides the opportunity to visually explore participants' psychological connections to their physical and social environment at university, from which to more fully understand the components of their positive experiences. Whilst quantitative metrics such as the NSS can start to draw out the endorsements of students' ratings of their university environment, this does not necessarily explore the more emotional underpinnings of these, which photo-elicitation is better enabled to provide.

Additionally, the use of photo-elicitation can perhaps have a more generic benefit to the discipline of psychology, which extends beyond individual research agendas. Indeed, the accessibility and advancement of visual technology and communication, through systems such as social networking sites and platforms such as Smartphone cameras, means that much of contemporary phenomena are experienced and recorded visually. As such, it is perhaps a relevant and timely opportunity from which to explore psychological issues using these visual means which are becoming increasingly prevalent and integrated as a part of the human experience. Indeed, photo-elicitation, as well as other methodological approaches which make use of electronic data, such as netnography (Kozinets, 2002), have a key benefit for advancing insight into the lived experience through use of this recorded, real-world data.

### **But what is Photo Elicitation?**

Multiple terms have been used to describe what appears to be, broadly speaking, the same method. For example, Collier (1957), in his original paper, discussed the use of photography within interviews and referred to them as photo-interviews. Harper (1986, 2002) was one of the first to use the term 'photo elicitation', describing it simply as using photos in a research interview. It has also been referred to as photo interviewing (e.g. Dempsey and Tucker, 1991) reflexive photography (e.g. Harrington and Lindy, 1998) and hermeneutic photography (Hagedon, 1994). The diversity in terminology perhaps reflects its use across multiple disciplines and this ubiquity could serve as a testament to its appeal. The lack of clarity around implementation does reinforce our aim to support the development of an approach that can be clearly identified and consistently applied for use within psychological research. We present this paper therefore as the first of its kind to explicitly articulate the practical steps



taken in photo elicitation research and to prompt further discussion around inclusive methodology.

### **Reflections on Power and Photo Elicitation**

A particular benefit of a technique such as photo-elicitation is that it has the potential to address some of the criticisms levelled at more traditional methods by critical psychologists (e.g. Fox, Prilleltensky and Austin, 2009), in particular, those around inclusive practice and power relationships in research. Whilst, the researcher-participant relationship is always characterised, at least to some degree, by an imbalance of power (Hill, 2013), with a tendency for participants to comply with the researcher and the researcher's "agenda" (Duckett and Fryer, 1998) photo-elicitation has the potential to provide a refreshing alternative.

Specifically, this is brought about by participants being able to control their participation by actively selecting relevant photos, pictures that they feel represent the phenomenon of interest, and thus lead the direction and content of the interview. Photo-elicitation provides a model of collaboration in research where the participants interpret their photos and meanings for the researcher (Loeffler, 2004). As a method, it is "empowering and emancipating participants by making their experiences visible" (Oliffe and Bottorff, 2007; p. 850).

Some research populations in particular may feel the power imbalance more than others. So, in addition to fostering a climate where power differentials are minimised, this method has the potential to create opportunities for inclusion especially in populations whose visibility and influence has traditionally been low. For example, researchers have often used observations and surrogate reports to gain information about children effectively leaving them out of decision-making processes. However, through carefully designed photo-elicitation studies children can actively participate in and contribute to the research process (Epstein et

al., 2006). Indeed, photo elicitation provides a platform through which participants, such as children, may be empowered in the research process (Aldridge, 2007; Gauntlett and Holzworth, 2006; Smith and Barker, 2000), and offers a means to re-position them in such a way as to put the child's voice firmly at the centre (Hill, 2013). One of the arguments as to how this repositioning occurs comes from the potential photographs have for children to voice aspects of their experience that may otherwise have been obscured by differences in linguistic competence between the researcher the child (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Hill, 2014). This has been found to be particularly beneficial when asking children to develop a photo diary of their experiences of caring for parents with severe mental health issues (Aldridge, 2007). Specifically, the photos which were collected could provide a dynamic perspective of the ongoing experiences of these young people, which were presented in the context of these experiences. Thus, the method proffered a level of agency and thus power in the research process for these participants, which would be difficult to afford through other methods.

The use of photos in this setting is helpful in facilitating a bridging of the world of the researcher and the participants (e.g. Bigante, 2010). Within interviews without the use of photos, the discussions can often be seen to be constrained by the researchers' frame of reference; Samuels (2014) reflected that within the verbal-only interviews in his study, his questions to his participants had more relevance to him and his own reality rather than the world of the participants. He described one participant commenting on their photo being like a mirror and that from discussing the photos and the taken for granted aspects of their experiences they had learned a great deal about their own reality. Samuels (2014) discusses this "breaking the frame" by using participant-driven photos stating that it was more impactful for him than his participants. This is in line with a focus in critical psychology to challenge culturally embedded concepts that might express a certain or specific world view (Teo, 2009). By breaking the frame, the participant's choice of photographs and subsequent elucidation may

challenge the researcher's implicit assumptions about a topic. Through this process of choice and explanation the researcher is able to refine and clarify the participants meaning (Oliffe and Bottorff, 2007). As a method it has the potential to reduce some of perceived differences in power and knowledge, making people feel that they are meaningful collaborators (Van Auken, Frisvoll and Stewart, 2010). In essence, the photo serves as an opportunity for researchers to explore and examine the way the participant understands and interprets their world (Bigante, 2010).

In our own ongoing research, we achieved this by asking our participants (final year undergraduate students) to select a number of photos which they felt best represented their experiences at university. Within this, we were careful to avoid imposing any specific requirements on when or where these photos were taken. We simply allowed participants a couple of weeks from the initial briefing, to compile photos on what they felt was relevant and meaningful to them in their experiences at university. The nature of the interview content therefore was very much determined by what photos they had brought in with them (discussed in more detail later in *Step 4: Interviews*). In this sense, participants are active collaborators in developing insight into the concept/s of the research issue, rather than being "subjects" upon which research is conducted.

### **Reflections on Ethics**

The use of photos in interviews does raise some ethical issues, regardless of whether the method is participant or researcher-driven. Ethical issues include concerns around the nature of the questions posed, the photos selected and consent. Studies have previously used this methodology to explore ethically-sensitive topics, for example orphaned adolescents (Thupayagale-Tshweneagae and Mokomane, 2012), people with HIV (Mitchell, DeLange, Moletsane, Stuart, and Buthelezi, 2005) and young people with cancer (Yi and Zebrack, 2010). The potential for distress is high when asking people to gather photos of, and discuss an

upsetting and unpleasant experience. The potential is heightened further when using a method intended to exploit emotional connections to memories and experiences (e.g. Kunimoto, 2004), caution is advised when choosing photo-elicitation if their topic is particularly sensitive. This does not rule out the use of such a method with some topics, only that methodological decisions should reflect such sensitivity. For example, Frohmann (2005) studied “battered women” using this method. This study involved participants bringing photos that represented their experiences to group discussions. The choice of photos and the level of disclosure in the discussions remained entirely in the power of the participants. Their photos did not reflect the brutality of the violence they had experienced and were more reflective of “ordinary” day-to-day life.

This example challenged researchers’ assumptions about the subject. A topic could be sensitive and challenging in its nature but it should not rule out exploration or use of expressive and visual methods. Indeed, there is an implicit assumption here that the emotional response evoked through the use of photos is a negative experience. However, this is not always necessarily the case; Oliffe and Bottorff (2007) found when using it in their interviews of men’s experiences of health and illness that it helped men talk more openly about their experiences some participants reported finding the act of talking about their photo’s to be quite therapeutic.

By moving an interview of a topic from something concrete (e.g. the photos) to something more abstract, it helps create a different level of understanding (Harper, 1986). A participant in this situation could be confronted by a new and previously considered understanding of their social world, perhaps challenging a taken for granted aspect of their experience, a realisation that their experience could be different to the researcher’s or anyone else’s. There is the potential for this to be a positive and somewhat reflective experience. However, there is also the potential for this to be reflected on negatively, participants may experience an uncomfortable realisation about their own position or stance on an issue. The power differentials present could lead a participant to believe their view or experience is

somehow wrong or inferior. Whilst this could be a criticism of any qualitative method where data is collected in person, it may be more sensitive as an issue with the use of photos. Care and sensitivity is required here to ensure that participants do not feel judged and are not left distressed.

Consent presents another significant ethical issue, Close (2007) felt when the images were specifically only to be seen by the research team, it seemed to increase the sense of ownership that the participants had for their task and their photos. She tried to empower her participants by giving the photos (once processed) back to the participants to allow them to decide which were to come to the interview and which were most important. They chose the photos which meant they controlled the interview and the research agenda of their participation. This is something that can be reflected on differently in the age of digital technology making it easier for participants only to select the images they are willing to share. A practical and ethical consideration here would be to ensure informed consent is explicit and takes into consideration power/accessibility issues of the sample being targeted. For example, Close (2007) recommends seeking separate consent for use of the data in analysis and use of the visual imagery in the dissemination of the research. It is of critical importance that when utilising a method that could be considered to be emotionally provocative and exposing, that a participant is fully aware of how their photos will be used. It is also important to advise participants that photos including other people or easily identifiable places would not be included in any publication.

### **Alignment of Power, Interview Format and Analytic Strategy**

The rise of 'point and shoot' digital photograph technologies has been paralleled by the emergence and adoption of several visual research methodologies (Biggerstaff, 2012). By illustration, the photo elicitation interview (PEI) has proven to be an attractive and broadly

adopted research method in health and educational studies (Briggs, Stedman, and Krasny, 2014; Epstein, et al., 2006; Goff, Kleppel, Lindenauer, and Rothberg, 2013; Justesen, Mikkelsen, and Gyimóthy, 2014; Rapport, Doel, and Wainwright, 2008). Several previous researchers have discussed the appeal and versatility of PEIs (Biggerstaff, 2012; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Lapenta, 2004; Shaw, 2013). However, there appears to be a gap in the literature on how to use photographs within PEI studies; we hope this paper goes some way to offering a solution.

Power in the research context also deserves attention, where in traditional research the power tends to be firmly situated with the researcher there is recognition that this may simply produce results that reflect rather than drive and challenge researcher interpretations. Attempts to redistribute power has implications for the way in which the interview itself is formatted and conducted. That is, traditional interviews may be structured, semi-structured or unstructured, for example, these vary in respect to the degree to which the researcher determines its direction by the specificity of the questions used. In the same way, PEIs may also adopt a variety of formats for example those where participants bring their own photos or those where the researcher retains control over the images shown. In recognition of this a conceptual and practical alignment is encouraged depending on the research questions. We suggest there are three distinct formats for PEIs (the procedures of these are described in the Practical Consideration section; see page 13):

- **Participant-Driven (Open):** participants are asked to provide any photo they feel relevant to the phenomenon of interest
- **Participant-Driven (Semi-structured):** The researcher makes participants aware of a set of questions and asks participants to seek relevant photos to align with these
- **Researcher-Driven:** - researcher provides the photos for the interview and uses these simply as stimuli to promote discussion

A further implication here is a third alignment in which both the nature of the power and the format of the interview need to correspond with the analytic strategy. For example, those seeking to use interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) which is a phenomenological and idiographic technique (Smith and Osborn, 2007); would be unlikely to adopt a researcher-driven interview format. The structured format would be inappropriate because the photographs selected would not be a representation of the participant's own experience and the associated questions would likely follow the agenda of the researcher. The use of visual imagery in qualitative research adds an additional dimension to enrich the data that is produced, the core methodological decisions are often around structure and analysis, and are made in advance. Questions have been raised over the status the photos hold as data and the implications this may have for analysis (Byrne, 2014), the assumption made here is that the photographs are merely a conduit to aid discussion. The photographs are not analysed, it is the associated narrative that serves as the data set (Harper, 2002). By utilising photographs within the interviews, the interview itself remains the method. As with traditional interviews (whether unstructured, or semi-structured) the work is typically underpinned by interpretivist and phenomenological assumptions. The primary objective being to access and interpret people's experiences of their worlds. Consequently, as with all methodological decisions, researchers should ensure their epistemological values are in line with their methods and analysis (Lopez and Willis, 2004).

The discussion thus far has focused on how and why PEI's may add value to psychological research projects. With these potential benefits in mind, we now present a **Step-by-Step Guide** to conducting photo elicitation research, in which we use ongoing research as an illustrative example.

## **Practical Considerations- A Step-by-Step Guide for Researchers**

### ***Step 1: Epistemological Decision***

Prior to any practical steps, the researcher must first decide on the nature of the phenomenon and the extent to which participants should be selecting their own photos and what role he/she is playing in the direction of the discussion. Thus, the nature of the phenomenon and how reflective this should be of the participant's own experience (and by implication, where the power lies between the researcher and participant) determines this decision.

The motivation to choose a qualitative method, such as a traditional semi-structured or unstructured interview, is often underpinned by phenomenological or interpretivist assumptions and a desire to understand the individual experience. Similar motivations would draw people towards using photo-elicitation especially when combined with the advantages described above. That being said, as a method it is flexible in that the guidance and instructions can fit different epistemological positions. For example, the photos could be used as a tool in a structured researcher-driven PEI and analysed in a controlled way, more reflective of traditional positivist assumptions. If, in contrast, epistemological beliefs lay more in a social constructionist sphere then the research process should be driven and understood much more from the participant's perspective. Therefore, the choice of photos should be strongly participant-driven and the interview format should be largely unstructured to allow the story and experience of the participant to emerge without influence or contamination by the researcher's pre-existing beliefs.

In our research on student experiences, we acknowledge that most student experience measures are quantitative. For example, in the NSS, there is a single overall satisfaction question that generates the percentage which is used as the national metric of satisfaction. We wanted to understand the various experiences that students drew upon when responding to that question, rather than assume that it reflected an aggregate of the questions that preceded. This



meant appreciating and understanding their individual experiences, focusing on latent interpretation rather than specific underlying meanings or motivations. We aligned our method with this position, not to reject the notion that satisfaction could be measured, but to identify the range of factors that might influence a student's score. Through this process of identification, the objective was to identify common themes that may be useful at an institutional level in terms of enhancing the student experience. For these reasons we adopted a position that sought participant involvement in the interview structure, in which students were asked to bring photos that represented their experience and talk us through them.

### ***Step 2: Participant Briefing***

As with any research that is ethically assured, briefing participants in photo-elicitation research is no different in respect of ensuring they are informed of the nature of the research. However, the main distinction is the phasing of this briefing. Specifically, if the researcher has chosen to undertake participant-driven photo elicitation, there are two phases of briefing. The initial briefing takes place at one time-point to inform the collection of the photos alongside the main purpose and ethics of the research. Following an appropriate period to permit photo collection (see Step 3 below), participants are then invited back to take part in the interview in which they are asked to bring in their photos. The second briefing takes place at this point which includes a fuller account of the purpose and ethical assurances of the research. Should the researcher wish to conduct a more structured interview in which he/she selects the photos him/herself, only one standard briefing would be required and Step 3 below is not applicable.

The power and structure that has been chosen will be reflected here in the instructions to participants. For a researcher-driven photo elicitation interview, there are no requirements here for instructions around gathering the photos for the participants. For a participant-driven semi-structured approach, participants may be instructed on the topic of interest (e.g. the

student experience) and explicit areas that should be captured (e.g. around home life, life on campus, assessment and time management). For a more open/unstructured format this would require the least guidance on what the content of the photos should be. For example, with the authors' ongoing research project, participants were asked to gather photos that represented or reflected their student experience. They were not given specific areas that should be considered and we left it with the participants to choose the areas that were most important in their own experiences as students.

A further consideration at this stage relates to consent. As discussed earlier, there are additional ethical considerations with the use of photos and what exactly participants are consenting to. Close (2007) recommends gaining consent for the use of the photos in the interviews/data collection and the use in any dissemination separately. This decision will be dictated by the researcher's dissemination plan and the strategy around using the photos. For example, the participants' photos may only be used in the interview as a tool to aid gathering the data and so this would be the only consent required. Alternatively, there may be a desire to include the photos in publications or conference presentations. Consent should be sought for these in addition to their consent to the interview itself. As per the British Psychological Society (2014) ethical guidelines, there are additional requirements around the use of audio or visual material that may be in some way identifiable. They stipulate that researchers should gain additional verbal consent during the audio-recording of an interview. In the case of PEIs this should be extended to reiterating consent to take part in the interview and also the use of the photos.

From an ethical perspective, within the initial briefing stage, it is important that researchers are clear and explicit that the content of photos should not depict anything illegal, or be deemed sensitive in nature. Additionally, it should be noted that if participants choose to select photos which depict another person/people, they should first obtain consent from the

relevant party/parties being using it. A further issue of consideration relates to the confidentiality of content presented in photos. That is, participants may choose to select photos which contain information which should not be disclosed or presented outside its existing context (e.g., representing policy information about an organisation, patient or client information, industry data). Participants should be made aware of this issue and ensure that any photos they select are not violating any confidentiality causes for any individual or organisation.

***Step 3: Photo Collection (not applicable to structured interview formats)***

After participants have been initially briefed, the researcher should allow a sufficient period of time for participants to collect and compile their photos. The duration of this is dependent on one key factor; whether the researcher is asking participants to compile photos already captured in the past, or asking participants to capture new photos to represent a current phenomenon. The latter of these would typically require a longer time period, and thus, this should be implemented appropriately within the research process. In the research team's ongoing research, participants were asked to compile new or existing photos (5-10 photos), and were given approximately two weeks to undertake this (dependent on being able to find a mutually convenient day and time for the interview). Our decision for requesting existing photos rather than asking participants to take solely new ones, was based on the rationale that a time-frame imposed by the research process would potentially shift the focus of their experience solely to the present rather than drawing upon their university experience more generally. Arguably, students' accounts of their current university experiences are influenced by their past experiences and events, which is one drawback of metrics such as the NSS, which garners data within a restricted time-frame, and out of context. The use of photo-elicitation, which can draw out visual records of these previous experiences, ensures that the student experience is being

understood from the dynamic perspective of the student journey as it occurred, rather than the end-product of their recollections. Thus, this determined our decision for existing, as well as new photos as the stimulus for discussion in our research.

As the briefing stage involves disseminating information about the study, gaining consent and arranging a follow up time for the interview, it is possible to also provide participants with more detailed instructions to take away with them (see Appendix 1 for an example instruction template). This serves as a reminder of the purpose of the task and the specifics of what they are required to do, as well as being an opportunity to reiterate any guidelines/rules around photo collection.

#### ***Step 4: Interviews***

The nature of the interview process is dependent upon what format of interview has been selected by the researcher and the nature of the photos collected. Each is detailed below.

##### *Participant-Driven Open Interview-*

Upon arrival of their interview, and following a Briefing (described in Step 2), participants are best provided with a series of generic open-ended guided questions to start the conversation. Our ongoing work on understanding university student experiences has used the following types of guided questions:

1. Please could you talk through these photos and explain why you chose them.
2. How do you think these capture your university experience?
3. Why is X (depicting something in a photo) an important aspect of you being a student here?
4. Is there anything else you want to discuss about your student experience which is not depicted here

Therefore, the questions themselves are not directing the nature of the discussion, but instead the photos are framing the structure of the interview process; it is the photos themselves which determine what and why issues are discussed. This is leaving the control and power of the interview process as much as possible with the participant<sup>1</sup>.

### *Participant-Driven Semi-Structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews using visual imagery would be reflective largely of semi-structured interviews in any other setting; the researcher has areas of interest but the flexibility of the interview should allow for “unexpected” topics to surface (e.g. Smith and Osborn, 2007). In this setting, participants may be given some guidance on sub-topics of the broader area of interest and so the interview will consequently have a loose structure to it. The researchers may still use some broader opening questions (as above) but the content of the photos will be less spontaneous.

### *Researcher-Driven Interviews*

Following the briefing, the researcher would present the photos they had previously selected to frame the direction of the interview. In this way, the photos are simply being used as stimuli in the research discussion process. This has often been undertaken by presenting one photo in turn and directing discussions in respect of individual photos (e.g. Smith and Woodward, 1999), but could also be done by presenting all at the beginning with questions associated with them. Methodologically speaking, whilst this is not necessarily as empowering, it is still likely to generate rich and interesting data due to the power the photos have within the interview context.

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<sup>1</sup> The discussion here is focused on individual interviews but the advice and guidelines could be applied to group interviews or focus groups. Additional considerations should be noted around confidentiality and levels of anonymity but it could still be utilised effectively.

### ***Step 5: Analysis***

As previously mentioned, due to the imprecise approach to data analysis, many researchers may be wary by the prospect of PEIs, given that previous photo elicitation research is often vague on the specific analytic decisions and strategies used. We aim to rectify this by discussing the appropriateness of using photo-elicitation with various qualitative research analysis, providing a starting point for researchers. Whilst each analysis is varied in nature, we believe each is appropriate for every type of PEI (Participants and Researcher Driven) and will be adjusted accordingly.

***Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis.*** Content analysis (CA; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) and thematic analysis (TA; Braun and Clarke, 2006) are widely used and flexible methods of analysis within qualitative research. Both methods are widely used in health settings (Grana and Ling, 2014; Hudon et al., 2012; West, Rudge, and Mapedzahama, 2016). There are several different kinds of CA and TA, however generally both methods seek to quantify textual data, by summarising and categorising themes encountered in data (Biggerstaff, 2012). However, TA goes further and interprets several aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). Choosing PEI's over verbal-only interviews, gives greater context to the interview as photographs are used in conjunction with the participants' dialogue, yielding deeper and more elaborate accounts of participants lives compared to verbal-only interviews (See Tran Smith, Padgett, Choy-Brown, and Henwood, 2015).

***Discursive and Discourse analysis.*** Discourse analysis (DA) is focused on the specific nuances of language, it explores the role language plays in a participants' description of their world (Parker, 1990; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Specifically, DA is concerned with how we 'socially construct' the world around us, through language (Holt, 2011). A fundamental aspect

of DA is that the researcher can appreciate and enter the participant's cognitive world (Resta, 2009).

PEIs are particularly suited for the study of language, as through the description of photographs by participants, researchers are given a unique representation of the participant's worldview as the photographs act as a medium to 'bridge communication gaps' (Collier and Collier, 1986, pp.99). The introduction of photographs into the interview schedule, allows researchers access to the participant's subjective realities through the discursive language they use to describe their photos (Harper, 2002; Oliffe and Bottorff, 2007). It is this interplay between participant and researcher that informs the analysis, and it is this interplay which allows participants to communicate their sensory experience, which can be difficult to articulate (Bryant, Tibbs, and Clark, 2011; See Ortega-Alcazar and Dyck, 2012 for example; Radley and Taylor, 2003).

*Narrative Analysis.* Narrative analysis (NA) aims to explore the lived narratives of participants' lives or social cultural stories (Emden, 1998; Sarbin, 1986). PEIs are particularly useful in NA as they connect "core definitions of the self" to society, culture and history (Harper, 2002). Additionally, PEIs, in line with the principles of NA create an interactive transactional process between the researcher and the participant, as the photographs used in the study take a constructive role in the interview, in a same way the dialogue between the 'narrator' and 'listener' does in NA (Bryant et al., 2011; Bryne, 2014; Marsh, Shawe, Robinson, and Leamon, 2016).

*Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.* Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), aims to place the experience of the participant at the core of the interview dialogue, by exploring how they assign meaning to their experience when interacting with their environment (Biggerstaff, 2012; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009; Smith, Harré, and Van Langenhove, 1995). There are several different methodologies that can be used to ascertain an individual's

previous experience, however these tend to focus on traditional verbal-only methodologies such as semi-structured interviews or focus groups (Smith, Gidlow, and Steel, 2012). The addition of visual stimuli, such as photographs may act as a memory cue, which may elicit richer data as the participant is re-immersed in their past experiences.

Photo elicitation, in particular participant driven, is well suited for the study of experience, as implicit in every participant generated photo is several personal decisions (Carlsson, 2001; Smith et al., 2012). As participants interpret their photographs during the interview, it gives them context, allowing for an increased insight and access by the researcher into the participant's perspective (Harper, 2002). Additionally, Radley and Taylor (2003) have suggested that the camera acts like a distancing object, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences from a different perspective, gaining a new insight. By illustration, see Silver and Farrants (2016) study exploring mirror gazing in participants with body dysmorphic disorder, which has a particularly strong rationale for why they decided to use photo-elicitation and is a good example of how to integrate IPA with photo elicitation.

### ***Step 6: Dissemination of Findings***

Once the analysis has been undertaken and the key findings have been considered, there are decisions to be made around the dissemination of the findings. This decision is best being made early in the research process, specifically in respect of the issue of consent and use of photos (see Step 2), and whether or not these may form part of the dissemination outcomes. The use of photos and visual material in the dissemination of the research draws attention and facilitates discussion (Olliffe and Bottorff, 2007), so it can provide an additional advantage in communicating the findings.

Figure 1 summarises these key steps in an illustrative format:



[Figure 1 about here]

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Photo elicitation has been critically considered from a conceptual and practical standpoint in terms of its potential for use in psychological research. We argue that its flexibility and power could elicit data that challenges traditional explanations of psychological phenomenon by relinquishing some of the power to participants and facilitating the elicitation of deeper, richer participant driven data. More broadly, this method offers a contemporary and refreshing alternative to traditional research techniques without compromising on rigour. Importantly it pays more than lip service to the expert by experience agenda by actively enabling the repositioning power, the anticipated consequence being to elicit data that reflects participants' experiences as opposed to simply reinforcing the research agenda.

It has a number of advantages including providing a flexible framework that can be easily adapted to a variety of epistemological positions and analytical strategies, often encouraging an investment and active participation in the research process, and also giving the opportunity to give a new insight into previously well-studied topics. It does present some challenges, specifically around the importance of transparent and robust ethical safeguards; however, one of the more significant challenges around its use has been the lack of consistency in the way it is operationalised. Much of this relates to one or more of the following issues; no formal agreed terminology for what actually constitutes photo elicitation (and what does not); and no prior conceptualisation or articulation on how photo elicitation may take a number of forms and how and why these relate differently to participant power and epistemological issues. As such, we intend the current paper as a resolution of the aforementioned issues to enable more consistent operationalisation of photo elicitation research.

The diversity that exists within qualitative psychological research should be celebrated as a substantial strength of the discipline, yet it is the disparity and often inconsistencies which arise from this that serve to reemphasise the dominance of quantitative methods which have been relatively coherent and unified (Madill and Gough, 2008). This suggests a need for some agreement around the qualitative methods being used in order to emphasise similarity in approach without lapsing into “over homogenization” (Madill and Gough, 2008; p. 267). It is hoped this paper goes some way to addressing this issue for this specific method, thus providing a benchmark for more consistent and informed research practice.

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## **Appendix 1: Example instruction sheet**

### **Instruction Sheet**

**[Title of your Project]**

The primary purpose of the study is to investigate *[insert topic area here to reiterate the purpose of the project and the experiences that are being captured being as structured/explicit or unstructured/vague as needed]*

What you are required to do:

1. Upon completion of the consent form, participants are required to capture between [X-X] number of photographs via *[insert method e.g. mobile phones, disposable cameras, existing pictures]* that reflect *[reiterate the topic being studied e.g. student experience]*
2. Once the photographs have been taken participants will then be required to *[instructions around what to do with the photos after e.g. to send to researcher ahead of interview, to bring along to the interview in electronic/hard copy]*
3. Once you have taken the photographs, they will then be invited to attend an interview at an agreed upon time *<leave gap here to insert date and time>* in order to participate in a discussion about your photo graphs.
4. Just to remind you, *[any rules/guidelines about photos e.g. please do not take any photos of people without their explicit consent, do not take inappropriate photos for example nudity, do not put yourself at risk to capture a photo]*

Figure 1. Framework for undertaking PEI research

