Method:	Photo-elicitation

Description: Photo-elicitation uses visual images such as photographs, pictures, cartoons and videos which are provided by either the interviewer or the participant as the basis for eliciting comments on the research topic and recording how participants attribute personal and social meaning and values to the images. Researchers could provide the images, or ask the participants to create pictures or take photographs that are subsequently used as the basis for focus groups or interviews. The aim is not so much studying the images as analysing how participants respond to them, and attribute social and personal meanings/value to this.

Application: Photo-elicitation can be useful to explore students and families' class positioning for example, and their associated habitus and capitals.

The method could also explore related themes such as how students deal with schools' demands outside schooling and how their families relate to their educational journey; how certain groups of students view their higher education experience; people's access to resources or capitals and opportunities; and to help understand power dynamics at play. The approach is useful to illuminate aspects of habitus when examining the participants' relationships to the particular social field under consideration.

Type of evidence: Qualitative; OfS Type 1 Narrative

Strengths: Photo-elicitation is a way of exploring individuals' experiences. The method helps to elicit nuanced detail from personal experiences. In individual sessions the interviewer and participant collaborate to create findings that are capable of mining the depth of human emotion and expression. Research interviews can be problematic because memories may be incomplete or inaccurate and interviewees tend to give simplified accounts of complex events. Photo elicitation methods are able potentially to mitigate against this problem. Using photographs may also help to alleviate certain social anxieties that arise when discussing difficult emotional subjects.

The approach emphasizes participation and research with people rather than 'on' them. Photo-elicitation is especially useful for engaging people who relate positively to visual media.

Participant produced artwork, photographs or videos can be empowering and purposeful for students. They can also help address power dynamics (e.g. between the researcher and the researched). Using images is considered a useful approach to engage vulnerable groups or marginalised communities in research, because it provides an opportunity for participants to document their reality.

It can usefully be embedded into activities creating naturally occurring data. For example can be used in a one to one session as part of an extended programme or as part of a group activity with feedback creating a focus group. Weaknesses: A potential limitation is that visual materials may be interpreted differently by researchers and participants (this can potentially be minimized by checking and clarifying the meaning intended). Debates exist as to whether photo-elicitation is a valid research method, because of the difficulties of attributing meaning.

The main limitation is that findings from this research are not able to be generalizable.

Depending on the method, photo elicitation may require participants to have basic skills e.g.in operating a camera, or either way may attract participants who are the most creative (although the widespread use of cameras with mobile phones has probably helped to reduce biases in recruitment to these types of studies).

Mixed Methods: Photo-elicitation can be complemented through other methods such as an interview or focus group and can provide structure to the discussions and focusing on what's important to the individual.

Expertise: High

Requirements: The research aims need to be carefully considered, in relation to drawing out people's experiences and perspectives. Participating may take courage for people who aren't used to putting their ideas out as

images. If the images are supplied by the researcher then it's important to choose images capable of theorizing from.

If delivered as part of an activity facilitators will need an awareness of how to deliver the session in a way that will result in useful evaluation data.

Getting participants to document their reality using photographs is becoming increasingly accessible as smartphones become more prevalent in society. However, it may not be appropriate for some groups of people including young children.

Ethical considerations: The main consideration is informed consent and that participants are happy to take part at all stages of the process. Approval from the participants must be sought to share the images with others, or to use in reports etc.

An additional limitation is that consent needs to be obtained from all people appearing in the images for confidentiality reasons. If consent cannot be obtained, then that image is either not included in the study or the image needs to be blurred. Issues of consent should be discussed with the participants throughout (e.g. in the recruitment emails, at the introductory meeting, at any subsequent research and during the writing of the report and subsequent publications).

Another concern is that participants might experience distress as a result of taking part in the research. Procedures need to be in place to mitigate the effects of this. For example, signposting to support services.

Work planning: The stages involved will depend on whether it is part of an activity or a separate evaluation and whether the photo-elicitation is using images generated by the researchers and participants. Either way the main aspect of the method is when the researcher and participant comes together in a reflexive collaborative interaction to explore the images together. For example, researchers could ask the participants questions of the photographs who then assist in discovering the answers to the research questions in the realities of the images/photographs.

Analysis: Your analysis should aim to provide insights into how the participants make sense of their worlds, and identify the ideas and meanings behind them. One of the interesting aspects of photo elicitation is that the analysis stage is usually based on a collaborative process between the researcher and interviewer to attribute meaning – that is the accounts of people's experiences are co-constructed by researchers and participants (i.e. rather than as a separate analytic method which is applied to data to get further results and ideas from existing data, for example after an interview). Ideally people's thoughts, questions, and observations will be recorded.

To do a thematic analysis, you can systematically code the interesting aspects, organizing the codes into potential themes and identifying data relevant to the themes.

Analysis of the patterns and meanings that emerge involves going back and forth through the photographs and interview transcripts and coding the evidence against the themes. Make sure you clearly define each theme and what it means. You could use a spreadsheet in Excel to record which pieces of evidence relate to each code. More sophisticated qualitative data analysis packages are also available (such as NVivo or MAXQDA). The final analysis involves describing the patterns in the data.

Reporting: The researcher and the participant can learn from the process providing both with new insights to inform their future actions. A formal report or presentation should include full information on the processes involved. Make sure that you relate your themes back to the research questions and objectives. It can also be helpful to identify the relationship of your findings to existing knowledge and/or previous research evidence. Using examples of images to illustrate your findings will help the reader.

Useful Link(s): Bates, E.A., McCann, J. J., Kaye, L.K. and Taylor, J.C. (2017) "Beyond words": a researcher's guide to using photo elicitation in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 14(4), 459-481.   Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2017.1359352

A small scale study conducted with a sample of estranged students at the University of Lincoln (UoL) used photo elicitation to explore the experiences of estranged students and provide the institution with recommendations on how to better support its estranged students. The motivation was to provide an opportunity for estranged students to share their experiences of student life in order to raise awareness of their situation and in so doing, reduce stigma and taboo around familial estrangement. The students in this study included estrangees, estrangers and estranged persons. Deciding how to recruit participants was a challenge and it was decided to send out an invitation to all students to take part in the study. Of those who responded who met the eligibility requirements, eight went on to meet with the researcher in a one-to-one meetings to provide information about the project, to receive instructions for participation and to talk through issues of consent.

The students were asked to take a series of images over the Easter holiday period - which represented their student experience, a period which is significant in the university calendar for estranged students since it is assumed that most students spend time with family during university holidays. The students were also encouraged to complete a research log of the images they took during the holiday in which they described the image and what it meant to them (which six people completed). Some 49 images were collated and afterwards the students attended focus groups where the images they had provided were shared and discussed. The students' comments about, and reactions to, these images were audio-recorded with their consent. The research questions explored perceptions of support, belonging and home. The students were not asked to provide the researcher with any details about their experience of estrangement – they were simply given the option to identify with one, or more, statements about estrangement (which was agreed as the most sensitive way of engaging with the participants who had, for the most part, not shared details about their experience with any other members of staff).

Ensuring the anonymity of the research participants was particularly pertinent in this project as some of the students expressed concerns to the researcher during the one-to-one meetings about who they might come across in the focus groups. Also, anonymity issues needed to be considered in relation to the use of the visual materials produced and there was agreement that the project would not share any image which might identify a participant. Other considerations included care of both the researched and the researcher., especially as asking estranged students to take photos was risky in some ways as it was so incredibly personal. In talking about their personal histories, the researcher needed to be supportive and empathetic but also clear that there were boundaries in terms of the support the researcher might provide. Some of the participants did see the focus groups as therapeutic and it was beneficial for them to talk to each other. The researcher clearly signposted participants to sources of university support and to the online information and resources from Stand Alone. The audio-recording was transcribed, and thematically analysed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

The complexity of family and familial estrangement was borne out in this study. The need to be able to support themselves financially was paramount in the concerns of the estranged students and although most were in receipt of Student Finance and some institutional financial support, this worry was clearly articulated and appeared to shape their perceptions of what they might do once they had graduated with the need to simply find any job in order to pay rent. Emotional support came from friends who were the most important support network, rather than from the university. This study also shed some light on the assumptions that are made about what students do during university vacations, and highlighted the coping mechanisms that the students drew on to help them make the most of their student experience, which tended to include maintaining a routine and keeping busy.

The findings were shared with senior management and access and participation colleagues. Findings, including quotes and images were also shared during a weeklong Twitter campaign spearheaded by Stand Alone. A campaign (the Estranged Student Solidarity Campaign) ran during November 2018 and colleagues from Student Support sent out the tweets to help raise awareness of estranged students and the range of issues they face along with signposting to institutional support and to the charity, Stand Alone. The University of Lincoln has signed the Stand Alone Pledge and the institution has publicly declared its support to existing and new estranged students and to review that support going forward. From 2020 new University of Lincoln students will be able to indicate on the enrolment form if they identify as estranged and will receive tailored information on the range of support available.

References:
Rachel Spacey (2020) "It's not like I'm on my own": recognising and recording the experiences of estranged students in Higher Education. IMPact University of Lincoln Volume 3(1) 2020