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Reflecting on the use of photo-elicitation methods in IPA research. Enhancing the interpretative lens and re-balancing power back to the participant. A review of published studies

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The use of visual and creative methods, specifically photo-elicitation in qualitative research has seen an increase in popularity in applied social science research, particularly in studies of psychology. This paper considers the evolution of the photograph as a research tool, particularly when combined with one-to-one interviewing. This paper situates the use of the photograph within historical and disciplinary contexts whilst offering new perspectives on its application to psychological fields of study. We argue that there are interesting benefits associated with supplementing qualitative methods such as one-to-one interviews with photographic stimuli. We present a recent systematic review of photo-elicitation used in research which identifies as being informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Interpretative phenomenological Analysis is a particular qualitative approach which aims produce an account of lived experience. It is often unconcerned by adhering to the application of pre-existing theoretical preconceptions and instead offers an inductive, iterative and highly idiographic account of a phenomena of which the participant has direct experience of. This may be phenomena linked to personal changes in health and illness, or even adapting to new learning environments. Central to the purpose of IPA is the recognition that this account of lived experience is an interpretative endeavor between both participant and analyst. We argue that this need for interpretation and co-construction offers space for creative methods to 'bridge the gap' between simply describing a phenomena and entering into the symbolic, metaphorical interpretative world of meaning making which pushes IPA research from mediocrity to excellence. In this review we aimed to capture information related to the use of photographic methods in IPA research with particular interest in exploring the body of published work across the following protocols; 1) sample for inclusion, 2) domain of study, 3) orientation of research questions, 4) design features, 5) variation of photo-method, 6) outcomes of research and 7) critical appraisal of study. There are 14 published articles utilising photographs in IPA from 2010-2018. These studies were conducted internationally and reach across different topic domains including health, developmental, education and occupational research. The reviewed studies extend across the age span and there was notable younger age participants involved. Using photographs offered particular advantages in comparison to interview alone. These include; (a) to empower marginalized, 'hard to reach' groups (b) to facilitate in-depth interpretative discussions of abstract, 'metaphorical' concepts, sensitive issues (c) to synthesise data with other methods to strengthen and d) enhance trustworthiness of findings. There was considerable variation in how photographs were 'produced' ranging from photos, 'elicited' by participants or as a secondary artefact produced by researcher as a stimulus for discussion. Visual methods using photographs vary, and include photo-narratives, photo-journals, photo-montage, photo-questionnaires. We situation our review within fast moving changes and opportunities for this method within a wider 'open science' framework and also pay particular attention to exploring ethical issues to ensure confidentiality, consent, privacy and wider 2018 General Data Protection Regulation adherence.

Keywords: photo-elicitation, photography, qualitative, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, metaphor, IPA, ethics, power.

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