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Visual inquiry

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1 **Visual inquiry: a method for exploring the emotional, cognitive and experiential**
2 **worlds in practice development, research and education**

3
4 **Abstract**

5 *Background:* Collaboratively exploring what matters to people, their understanding of
6 concepts and ideas for innovation can be a challenge in practice development, research
7 and education due to potential difficulties in articulating complex issues. Visual Inquiry
8 is described as a process which involves the use of generic images to facilitate dynamic
9 dialogue between the inquirer and participant/s, in order to support shared
10 understanding and co-production of knowledge.

11 *Aims and Objectives:* The aim was twofold, firstly to describe the Visual Inquiry method
12 and secondly to explore the experiences of using Visual Inquiry in practice development,
13 research and education.

14 *Research Design:* Qualitative data was generated from a group of academics (n=8) who
15 took part in a Co-operative inquiry, exploring their experience of using this method
16 (Visual inquiry) in fifteen independent studies.

17 *Findings:* Eight academics (inquirers) drew on their experience of using Visual Inquiry
18 from fifteen independent studies. Analysis of the qualitative data identified eight
19 themes in relation to the process and outcomes of using Visual Inquiry; Evocative
20 Participation; Playfulness; Holding vulnerability; Welcoming authenticity; Illumination;
21 Surfacing depth; Unearthing possibilities; Evoking surprise and Provocation.

22 *Conclusion:* Visual Inquiry was found to be a useful method for opening up dialogue
23 which allowed the facilitator to adapt a flexible approach and the participant to richly
24 articulate insights on their cognitive, emotional and experiential worlds.

25
26 **Implications for Practice:**

- 27
- 28 • Visual Inquiry is a useful method for practitioners looking to open up dialogue,
29 and uncover tacit knowledge, in practice development, research and education
 - 30 • Visual Inquiry is a particularly useful method for those new to facilitation,
31 practice development and research and encourages an improvisational
approach

- 32 • Co-operative inquiry enables us to gain insight into our own practice and explore
33 possibilities for the future

34

35 **Keywords:** Visual Inquiry, Co-operative Inquiry, interviews, photo elicitation, imagery

36

37 **Background**

38 Practice development is described as a continuous journey of developing and
39 innovating in care settings and key to enabling this to happen is listening to and using
40 the stories and experiences from people who give and receive services (Garbett and
41 McCormack, 2002; Dewing et al., 2014). A focus on creating new possibilities through
42 dialogue is shared by both practice development and the fields of research and
43 academia. However exploring what matters to people, their experiences and
44 understanding of complex concepts can be a challenge. Questions asked during
45 qualitative interviews can facilitate self-expression on the part of interviewee;
46 however, a number of factors may influence the types of responses given. Van House
47 (2006, p.1464) accounts for some of these potential influences:

48

49 *When respondents are asked to recall their actions, intentions, or*
50 *understandings, their memories may be incomplete or inaccurate. They may give*
51 *shortened or simplified accounts of complex events or reasoning. And their*
52 *reports may be influenced by their perceptions of the researchers' expectations.*

53

54 The use of imagery during interviews is one possible way of addressing these challenges,
55 as this technique has the potential to lessen emotional and cognitive barriers (Karnieli-
56 Miller et al., 2017) and to deepen the relationship between the inquirer and participant
57 (Harris & Guillemin, 2012; Padgett et al., 2013). This article will discuss the findings of a
58 Co-operative Inquiry groups exploration of the use of Visual Inquiry in their own
59 research and practice.

60

61 Imagery can be used in research or other contexts including practice development to
62 open up dialogue through a variety of mediums. Methods which use film/video include

63 but are not limited to video ethnography, video elicitation, video stimulated recall and
64 participatory film-making. The use of imagery in the form of photographs/ pictures or
65 illustrations can also take a number of forms, including but not limited to: photo
66 elicitation, photo voice, photolanguage, and associative imagery technique.

67

68 When using photographs or pictures, there are some variances with regard to the types
69 of images used and the process of using the images within each of the approaches listed
70 above. In the case of photoelicitation and photovoice the picture or image is created by
71 the researcher and/or participant. Sets of generic images are used in photolanguage
72 (black and white images) and associative imagery technique (spectrum of colours). The
73 process often has a level of control exerted by the facilitator/researcher, for example
74 that there be silence when picking images in the photolanguage approach. The types of
75 images used are also specific, for example to the topic of the inquiry (Bessell et al., 2007;
76 Vacheret, 2004; White et al., 2009).

77

78 The term 'Visual Inquiry' was created to reflect the particular features of this use of
79 imagery in opening up dialogue that is described in this article. 'Visual Inquiry' was
80 chosen by those using this method as it forefronts the 'inquiry' aspect of this visual
81 method; the inquirer is engaging from a place of openness and curiosity as to the
82 emotional, cognitive and experiential worlds of participants. Visual Inquiry has been
83 used by the authors of this article for a range of intentions including: supporting
84 interviews; enabling understanding of values, events and experiences; facilitating
85 relationship building and connection; and sharing of knowledge. It has been used in
86 participatory research, practice development, experiential education or spontaneously
87 with students, staff, clients, residents or carers; in a range of health and social care
88 settings including clinical (hospital, community, residential, forensic) and other learning
89 and online environments.

90

91 The process of Visual Inquiry involves displaying a set of generic images of both symbolic
92 and literal nature to trigger more meaningful dialogue, for example, images might
93 include polar bears on ice, a maze, a child with a multi-coloured umbrella, and an animal
94 in a cage (for more information, see

95 <http://myhomelife.uws.ac.uk/scotland/resources/visual-inquiry-tool/>). As well as being
96 a mixture of symbolic and literal images other features of the images include: clarity of
97 image (can be seen from a distance), combination of images featuring people,
98 landscapes and object and images which include a variety of facial expressions which
99 may convey different emotions. The reverse side of each of the Visual Inquiry cards has
100 no image; instead this side has one colour recognising that for some people a single
101 colour may more closely resonate with their feeling/thought/experience than an image.
102 The images are laid out on the floor or any other hard surface. The inquirer invites
103 participants to pick an image and poses an open 'stem' question to the participant, such
104 as, 'Select an image that sums up what involvement means to you'. The participant/s
105 are then invited to choose one (or more) images which resonate with them in response
106 to the open stem question. While choosing an image there may be some conversation
107 between participants, and, if more than one participant wishes to pick the same card,
108 they are invited to share it.

109

110 It is important to note that participants are not be forced to pick an image, if they do
111 not wish to do so. If a participant expresses that they do not wish to pick an image, or
112 cannot identify an image in response to the stem question they are then invited to
113 consider if there is an alternative way they would like to share their perspective. When
114 participants have picked an image, the inquirer asks the participant/s in turn to share
115 (to the level with which they feel comfortable) why they picked that particular image to
116 talk about the stem question. Using the method may take anything from a few minutes
117 (e.g. icebreaker to help a group integrate and connect) to considerably longer (e.g.
118 feedback session on teaching, research interview, practice development meeting).

119

120 In summary the principle distinguishing features of Visual Inquiry are:

- One set of images being used across a variety of settings and contexts
- Accessible method for those with varying levels of facilitation experience
- Adaptability of the method with scope for improvisation

121

122

123 The benefits of the use of images as part of an interview process has been illustrated in
124 a wide range of studies; for instance, providing a voice to different groups of participants
125 (Dewar 2012, Gong et al., 2012; Karnieli-Miller et al., 2017; Schwingel et al., 2015),
126 accessing tacit knowledge (Dewar 2012; Hatten et al., 2013), enhancing the education
127 process (Linz et a., 2011; Garner, 2014), enriching data analysis before, during and after
128 interviews as well as helping participants to articulate potentially difficult concepts
129 (Kruse, 1999; Dewar, 2012). As described above, there have been several research
130 studies that have articulated the benefits of using images in the interview process and
131 this has been reported across a wide range of disciplines. However a systematic inquiry
132 into the experience of those who have used images in the research, teaching and their
133 own studies has not been carried out.

134

135 **Aim and Objectives**

136 The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of using Visual Inquiry in research,
137 education and practice development in a range of health, social care and academic
138 settings as part of a Co-operative Inquiry group.

139 Following on from this aim, a key objective of this article is to describe the Visual Inquiry
140 method and the different contexts in which Visual Inquiry has been used whilst also
141 reporting on the experiences of researchers, teachers and PhD students when using this
142 method.

143

144 **Research Design**

145 A group of eight academics (researchers, teachers and PhD students) were invited to
146 participate in the study based on their experiences of using Visual Inquiry in research,
147 education and practice development. The Co-operative Inquiry group drew their
148 experience of the method from fifteen independent studies (see Table 1); this
149 potentially strengthens the findings of the study due to the variety of skill mix, multiple
150 participants and assortment of settings.

151

152 [Insert Table 1.]

153

154 Over the course of one year (2015-2016), a Co-operative Inquiry approach was used to
155 develop the aims and methods and to explore the experiences of the eight academics
156 using Visual Inquiry in research, education and practice settings. The key feature of Co-
157 operative Inquiry is the value given to everyone's experience, expertise and full
158 participation, with an emphasis on active partnership (Heron and Reason, 2006).

159 The first step in data generation was the co-creation of and distribution of open-ended
160 questions to the Co-operative Inquiry Group generated via an email discussion in the
161 early stage of the study. Co-operative Inquiry group members were invited to use Visual
162 Inquiry cards in their responses and took up this opportunity. Questions included:

- 163 • When have you used Visual Inquiry
- 164 In using the method:
- 165 • What has surprised you?
- 166 • What have you learnt along the way?
- 167 • What do you remain curious about?
- 168 • What are the benefits and impact?
- 169 • What are the challenges?
- 170 • What examples can you share with us that illustrate responses to these
171 questions?

172

173 Data generation within the Co-operative Inquiry was drawn from personal writing,
174 group discussions and email exchanges. The answers to the above questions were
175 collated and fed back to the group members for further discussion and elaboration of
176 content the findings of which went on to inform the initial insights and emerging
177 themes. This Co-operative Inquiry continued iteratively over the course of the study
178 whereby discussion of the emerging themes led to in-depth analysis of the resonance
179 and relevance of the themes to the inquiry members' experience of the practical use of
180 images, thereby enhancing the quality and trustworthiness of the data collection
181 process. To situate the learning from the ongoing Co-operative Inquiry in the context of
182 the body of knowledge, a scoping literature review was undertaken to include other
183 forms of visual techniques which used photographs or picture, namely photovoice,
184 photolanguage, and associative imagery technique.

185 **Ethical Considerations**

186 The Chair of the School of Health, Nursing and Midwifery Ethics Committee at UWS
187 advised that ethical approval was not required for the overall Co-operative Inquiry
188 group, as ethical approval had been given for all the individually quoted Visual Inquiry
189 studies on which the Co-operative Inquiry was based. Nonetheless, all members of the
190 Co-operative Inquiry group were consulted and gave consent for their reflections on the
191 Visual Inquiry approach to be shared within the article. Consent was seen as an ongoing
192 process rather than a one off event and we discussed what data was being generated
193 and how it would be used during each Co-operative Inquiry group meeting.

194 **Data Analysis**

195 Immersion/Crystallisation techniques (Borkan, 1999) were used to analyse the data. This
196 method of analysis makes use of 'self' in engaging both cognitive and emotional
197 processes to explore depth of meaning to 'hear, see, and feel the data' (Borkan, 1999,
198 p.180). The approach can be collaborative and goes through seven key stages which are
199 documented in Table 2. The process of immersion/crystallisation was much more
200 recursive than linear and allowed for an openness to the insights that were emerging
201 bringing additional depth to the discussion and analysis.

202

203 [Insert Table 2.]

204

205 **Findings and Discussion**

206 This section provides an analysis of the key themes emerging from the discussions of the
207 Co-operative Inquiry group about the experiences of using the method across a range
208 of research studies, practice development and education interventions. Two key themes
209 which emerged related to both process and outcomes of using this method were
210 'evocative participation' and 'illumination'. Each theme and subtheme is discussed
211 separately but it is important to note here that there is some overlap between themes.

212

213

214 ***Evocative Participation***

215 'Evocative participation' suggests an engagement that stretches and stimulates in new
216 directions, and which pays heed to our various ways of knowing through honouring
217 experiential, emotional and cognitive processes in both ourselves and others. It can be
218 light-hearted, fun, energising and enable people to look at questions, experiences and
219 concepts from a different perspective, especially when used in a safe environment
220 where risks can be taken (Sharp et al., 2018). A safe environment in this context is
221 reflective of psychological safety which has been described as 'a shared belief held by
222 members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking' (Edmondson,
223 1999, p. 350). 'Evocative Participation' emerged as a key theme from a number of
224 subthemes: 'playfulness', 'holding vulnerability' and 'welcoming authenticity'.
225 Playfulness will be discussed in terms of how curiosity, creativity and spontaneity in
226 Visual Inquiry can positively disrupt the usual flow of an interview or group discussion.
227 The ways in which both the inquirers and participants in a Visual Inquiry activity being
228 open to the experience of being vulnerable will be described under 'Holding
229 Vulnerability'. This will be followed with a discussion on how the Visual Inquiry method
230 is one means by which people can access what is 'real and true' for them, and go on to
231 share from this authentic place.

232

233 ***Playfulness***

234 Playfulness links with the concept of playful provocation, described by Sharp et al.
235 (2018) as a positive way of disrupting normal flow.

236 The Co-operative Inquiry group suggested the process opened 'a new and bright way of
237 working' and was a 'light-hearted exercise' with some describing a sense of 'playfulness'.
238 Playfulness in this context relating to curiosity, creativity and spontaneity (Guitard et al.,
239 2005), while still giving due respect and attention to the potentially sensitive and
240 emotive nature of the topics being discussed. This playfulness was felt to help to release
241 tension that can arise from the possible intensity of an interview experience.

242

243 Visual Inquiry appears to facilitate a 'humble' approach (Schein, 2013) to
244 interviewing/group discussion through the genuine interest and curiosity of the inquirer,

245 and the capacity for the use of images to allow the participant to take a playful approach
246 to the answering of the question.

247

248 *I particularly like being surprised by the responses evoked by different images*
249 *and the way in which the process hands over control – to a certain extent – to the*
250 *individuals involved. I also like the fact that individuals seem to enjoy the process*
251 *and are interested in it (Inquirer 8).*

252 This playfulness also appeared to generate a sense of energy in the Visual Inquiry activity
253 where it was described as being ‘more story telling rather than fact based as I feel
254 sharing stories can potentially generate more energy than sharing facts’ (Inquirer 4).

255

256 Some of the Co-operative Inquiry group members spoke of the playful element in terms
257 of the physicality of using the images, the shared dialogue and jokes when vying for the
258 same image, or when expressing how this was something new and different for them.
259 The finding space to place the cards, whilst a challenge, meant that cards were
260 sometimes scattered on a table top or floor area so the participants had to walk around,
261 or crouch down in order to see the cards more closely. This was found to be helpful in
262 creating a more relaxed atmosphere. This relates to Carlsen et al’s., (2014) suggestion
263 that tactile stimulation can produce generative ideas. This playful approach appears to
264 link with generativity, the challenging of accepted norms and opening up of new
265 possibilities, as discussed by Bushe and Paranjpey (2015, p.331) who suggest
266 ‘practitioners may want to experiment with ways of priming participants somatically,
267 with perhaps visual metaphors, and ways of ‘holding ideas in their hands’. From the
268 perspective of the Co-operative Inquiry group members, visual inquiry as an approach
269 appears to facilitate this process.

270

271 The process of physically selecting an image was felt to have benefits. The fact that the
272 participant has to change their posture by uncrossing their arms to choose a photograph
273 can result in physiological, psychological and behavioural changes to the individual. This
274 action potentially impacts on hormones and reduced cortisol levels (Carney et al, 2010),
275 which may lead to decreased anxiety levels. Participation in Visual Inquiry can also
276 change the physical dynamics between the enabler and participant in relation to posture

277 and position. There is a less face to face encroachment on personal space using this
278 technique as it often requires a 'side by side' position. This shoulder to shoulder
279 communication approach is thought to be less invasive and has been noted to be more
280 acceptable, particularly in men (Nelson, 2014).

281

282 Within the literature, which gives descriptions on the use of imagery in
283 research/therapy, there has tended to be a focus which forefronts a set structure to the
284 activity, for example to the process of how participants pick the images. The findings of
285 the Co-operative Inquiry suggest that structure such as a carefully worded stem
286 question and turn-taking by participants when sharing their thoughts are very necessary
287 to the success of the method, and that within this structure there is scope for flexibility.
288 Examples of this flexibility discussed by Co-operative Inquiry group members include:
289 participants having conversations (or not) whilst picking the image, participants
290 changing their mind and picking an alternate image, or participants picking more than
291 one image at a time. Further playful, improvisational approaches to the use of images
292 in research and practice development was discussed the Co-operative Inquiry group as
293 being an area worthy of future exploration.

294

295 ***Holding Vulnerability***

296 Co-operative Inquiry group members shared how Visual Inquiry fostered a sense of
297 vulnerability. Brown (2012, p.34) described vulnerability as 'uncertainty, risk and
298 emotional exposure' and highlighted the necessary place for vulnerability in creating
299 connection, and cultivating courage and compassion. Vulnerability presented in the Co-
300 operative Inquiry group in two ways: the vulnerability of the person facilitating the
301 Visual Inquiry exercise and the vulnerability of those who were involved as participants.
302 One Co-operative Inquiry group member recalled using a Visual Inquiry activity at the
303 beginning of a meeting as a 'way in' to being open about some anxieties she was
304 experiencing with regard to fearing that the work she was presenting might not meet
305 the expectations of those present.

306

307 This then led to others at the meeting sharing about how they felt about the work, and
308 how they would like her to feel by the end of the meeting.

309

310 *...without the image cards I'm not sure if I would have been able to share how I*
311 *was feeling...it felt like they made it more acceptable to share at this level without*
312 *sounding like I was over-sharing. (Inquirer 4)*

313

314 Group members shared feelings of uncertainty about using this method, with initial
315 feelings of hesitancy and tentativeness. Some talked of concerns over potential
316 scepticism from participants and colleagues and having the courage to try it out. There
317 was a holding of their own vulnerability in these early stages, alongside 'being brave
318 enough to try it and trust it (Inquirer 8). A number of the group members were relatively
319 new to inquiry when they began using this method and so there was a comfort attached
320 to using an approach that felt possible and did not rely on the expert skill of the inquirer:

321

322 *what I found most surprising about using this method was how accessible it was*
323 *to both myself as a novice researcher and also for the participants who had never*
324 *used this method before...even with limited confidence, the process unfolds itself*
325 *and does not require much direction from a facilitator or researcher. (Inquirer 3).*

326

327 One Co-operative Inquiry group member picked a lighthouse as an image to represent
328 how they felt about Visual Inquiry:

329

330 *It (lighthouse) signifies safety for a method that I found simple and accessible to*
331 *use both for me and the participants (Inquirer 3).*

332

333 As well as holding their own vulnerability there were discussions regarding the
334 participants' fear of giving a wrong answer and how that could be managed by the
335 inquirer, which also highlighted the importance of ensuring clarity in the stem question
336 and reassuring the participants that whatever they say was valid:

337

338 *...at times people may need reassurance that there is no right answer. That the*
339 *question you ask is important on whether the exercise will be successful as it*
340 *might be (Inquirer 2).*

341

342 This clarity in the construction of the question was deemed important so that the
343 interviewee would not struggle over the questions meaning, so that the question itself
344 would not become a distraction. Rather, that due to the stem question being clear and
345 concise that the interviewee could focus on their response.

346

347 When presenting an account of the use of Visual Inquiry, the Co-operative Inquiry group
348 members felt it important to extend beyond a cognitive representation of using this
349 method and to practice the theme of Vulnerability. This enabled the Co-operative
350 Inquiry group to offer an insight into the emotional experience of using Visual Inquiry,
351 hence the sharing of the feelings of uncertainty experienced, particularly when starting
352 out with this method.

353

354 ***Welcoming Authenticity***

355 One Co-operative Inquiry group member also expressed how, whilst taking part in a data
356 generation activity during her PhD, for her, the physical act of holding an image card
357 helped her to share more openly:

358

359 *In some way the card acts as a buffer, so that in a group of new people it allows*
360 *a holding of space and of story so that there was the possibility to share with*
361 *depth without feeling exposed (Inquirer 4).*

362

363 This buffer effect is similar to the description by Vacheret (2004) of the photo as an
364 intermediary, where both the speaker and those listening feel honoured, due to the
365 significant amount of attentiveness given to the speaker, and the fact that the photo
366 acts as a 'third-party'. Vacheret (2004) suggests that the question and the image provide
367 stability to the process, and that the image provides a support to the person in terms of
368 how it can affirm their own thinking.

369

370 As the method is simple, relatively quick and accessible to use, it is viewed as supportive
371 to both the inquirer and the participant. It may enable the focus to stay on the desired
372 topic whilst also remaining grounded in human connection. The findings of the Co-

373 operative Inquiry group discussion are in line with what has been previously highlighted
374 within the literature in terms of how the use of imagery can prompt hidden emotional
375 responses (Collier, 1957), provide richness in discussion (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2017) and
376 support depth when participants share their recollection of experience (Harper, 2002).
377 All of which may enable a participant to engage more of themselves to a greater extent
378 than what may be encouraged through the use of verbal interview techniques (Collier,
379 1957; Karnieli-Miller et al., 2017).

380 *I was surprised at the volume of data/information that can come from people*
381 *selecting an image and explaining their choice. Additionally, I found it surprising*
382 *how open people were about their emotional or personal experience. I am unsure*
383 *if a simple conversation or interview would elicit the same response (Inquirer 3).*

384

385 It would appear from the data which emerged during the Co-operative Inquiry group
386 discussions that Visual Inquiry can facilitate authentic, genuine responses and is one
387 means by which to address the power relationships between researcher and participant.
388 This is integral to qualitative research methods, although it can prove challenging to
389 achieve (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). The use of Visual Inquiry, as with other methods
390 which endeavour to address power imbalances, is in keeping with theory from within
391 relational constructionism and feminist research in terms of questioning and potentially
392 disrupting established norms of where power is held (Hosking and Pluut, 2010; Pink,
393 2007). The Co-operative Inquiry group highlighted the ability of Visual Inquiry to enable
394 authentic responses from participants, through providing a space for individuals to feel
395 safe to share their personal experiences/ and feelings:

396

397 *I have been surprised at how articulate participants can be when using Visual*
398 *Inquiry they say much more about how they feel, and the image seems to provoke*
399 *a different level of articulation (Inquirer 1).*

400

401 While it may be easy to assume an understanding of another's position, inquiring into
402 an individual's personal views, expressed via images can bring about a level of
403 unexpected authenticity whereby there is an opportunity for their 'lens' to be brought
404 into discussion and shared to enable understanding and an acknowledgment of

405 difference. There is opportunity for shared learning within this as new landscapes of
406 ideas and possibilities open up through hearing the alternative perspectives of others
407 when they share on the image they have picked (Vacheret, 2004). This was also reflected
408 in how participants selected images. One member of the Co-operative Inquiry group
409 stated:

410

411 *People are open to trying something different. Slightly different styles people*
412 *have when picking cards, i.e. some people know what they'd like to say and pick*
413 *an image that fits that, others pick the card first and use that to help them arrive*
414 *at what they'd like to share (Inquirer 4).*

415

416 The use of images appears to lessen rhetoric and facilitate individuals to describe their
417 experience in a unique and authentic way:

418

419 *Participants and students have the opportunity to speak freely about a subject,*
420 *without the researcher/lecturer putting words into their mouths. This seems to*
421 *offer the opportunity for individuals to provide a true reflection around how they*
422 *feel about a subject (Inquirer 5).*

423

424 The above quote illustrates the power of the image to enable us to access and connect
425 with our own 'inner images', it may be a memory/emotion/sensory experience from
426 another time and place, and consequently to be gifted with hearing the inner images of
427 others. Sometimes connection with emotions can take people by surprise and this
428 emphasises the importance of creating a safe environment, reflective of psychological
429 safety as discussed under the theme of evocative participation. One way of achieving
430 this may be through development of agreed ways of working (Dewar et al., 2017) where
431 discussion takes place about what would help participants if there is expression of strong
432 emotion.

433

434 ***Illumination***

435 The theme of Illumination comprised the sub themes of surfacing depth, unearthing
436 possibilities, and creating surprise/provocation. This relates to what one Co-operative

437 Inquiry group member described as ‘shedding light’ on participants lived reality and
438 experiences. It can be beneficial to both the participant and the inquirer as it may
439 encourage a deeper understanding and appreciation both of our own experience and
440 that of others. A new metaphor is offered in relation to this aspect of sharing personal
441 experiences when using images in research/process- that of the ‘soft light’ and ‘spot
442 light’. The process of using Visual Inquiry encourages the use of a ‘soft light’ in
443 illuminating an individuals or a groups stories. The Co-operative Inquiry group
444 highlighted that people are not placed under a ‘spot light’ and coerced into sharing what
445 they would not choose to reveal, rather a gentle curiosity is awoken on why an image
446 has been selected and what meaning it holds for the individual.

447

448 ***Surfacing depth***

449 Members of the Co-operative Inquiry group described how the process enabled what
450 was previously unknown or possibly assumed, to come to the light of understanding:

451 *It is maybe like the lamp shedding light on the forest floor where there is so much*
452 *life happening. The pictures can help to illuminate areas that others might not*
453 *otherwise have been able to share in (Inquirer 4).*

454

455 Group members observed and commented on how individuals, when asked a question,
456 would commonly take their time to pause and select an image and wondered if this was
457 a time in which the person could engage in moments of reflection and analysis. This
458 element of taking time to pause appears to be new within the literature and so may be
459 a helpful point of consideration for those interested in trying out this method. The group
460 were curious that this time and space might afford an opportunity for the person to go
461 deeper, and to shed more light on thoughts or feelings related to an experience. This
462 relates to what Harrison (2002, p.864) described as the ‘reflexivity between image and
463 the verbalisation which produces data for the investigator’. This reflexive awareness
464 evoked during the process could be viewed as a form of co-analysis during data
465 collection.

466

467 Further and crucially, there was a feeling of safety in supporting participants to bring
468 their experiences to light with others:

469

470 *Safety for a method I found simple and accessible to use, both for me and the*
471 *participants and also the light element for how it shone a light on the participants*
472 *so clearly (Inquirer 3).*

473

474 As has been previously discussed members of the Co-operative Inquiry group spoke of
475 Visual Inquiry as shedding light. There was also an acknowledgement that this light may
476 be illuminating areas which were, up to this point, in the shadow and therefore of the
477 need to proceed gently:

478

479 *...images accessing deeper memories and the importance of taking care when*
480 *using the cards because the emotional response can take participants by surprise*
481 *(Inquirer 7).*

482 So it would appear that the use of images was perceived to enable people to travel deep,
483 and then bring their 'findings' to the surface.

484

485 ***Unearthing Possibilities***

486 The value in not knowing and being genuinely curious to seek what others may think, or
487 may have experienced was discussed as an additional benefit of Visual Inquiry. This
488 relates to Appreciative Inquiry approaches (the underpinning methodology in a number
489 of the studies in table 1.) where the focus is on possibilities rather than problems
490 (Cooperrider et al., 2008). One group member when asked to sum up their experience
491 of using Visual Inquiry described this as 'perhaps something that starts from a small seed
492 and grows into something quite beautiful' (Inquirer 5). There was a sense that the
493 'answers' are there within us as individuals or as a group and the method of Visual
494 Inquiry can 'unearth' what is lying dormant within a person, participant or team. Hatten
495 et al. (2013, p.23.89.3) describe this as facilitating individuals to access tacit knowledge,
496 the sense of you 'know it when you see it'. As is illustrated in Table 1.0, Co-operative
497 Inquiry group members individually used this method across a variety of settings where
498 the use of images has not been reported on previously and consistently found that it
499 holds considerable value. Whilst it might not be possible to be used with certain
500 individuals for example, those who are confused, or have visual impairments, it has been

501 used successfully with individuals with cognitive impairment. An example of its
502 successful use with people with cognitive impairments is described below, when a
503 resident in a care home was consulted on what he would like in a new care home being
504 built, he picked an image of ducks and shared:

505

506 *I would want ducks at the new care home. Everyone can feed the ducks, doesn't*
507 *matter who you are. It's nice to feed things, makes you feel good that they are*
508 *eating up. You don't have to speak when feeding the ducks – you are sitting*
509 *alongside others. It's outside. Kids may want to come up and feed the ducks*
510 *(Research Study 15).*

511

512 When we as a Co-operative Inquiry group discussed the story above we felt it
513 unearthed the possibility of how a person with dementia could contribute to a focus
514 group discussion.

515

516 ***Evoking surprise and provocation***

517 Selection of the images was seen as powerful in promoting provocation. Provocation
518 can be witty, playful, challenging, questioning and encouraging (Pangrazio, 2017).
519 Provocation can excite, intrigue, arrest thought, and interrupt flow (Heinonen and
520 Ruotsalainen, 2013; Sharp et al., 2018). It can help us to look at things through a
521 different vantage point aimed at challenging assumptions whereby 'it can be easy to
522 jump to conclusions as to what a certain image might mean and then when the person
523 shares realise it is something quite different' (Inquirer 4).

524

525 The provocation evoked by this surprise element of varying interpretations of images
526 appeared to promote a deeper level of consideration and seemed to help people to
527 create possibilities for thinking in a different way. Thus differing interpretations of the
528 same image supports what an Co-operative Inquiry group member described as 'holding
529 our assumptions lightly'. All who took part in the Co-operative Inquiry group highlighted
530 how they have been, at times, surprised how there is the possibility of the previously
531 unseen or unconsidered to emerge each time they use the images.

532

533 *Even when the images feel familiar that there is still the possibility that each time*
534 *they are used I might see something new in them (Inquirer 4).*

535

536 Some members of the Co-operative Inquiry group found when using this method that
537 participants' first experience of being introduced to Visual Inquiry could evoke both
538 surprise and scepticism if their previous experience of responding to a question had
539 been purely verbal means.

540

541 *I've seen how people can initially be doubtful of the point of using the image*
542 *cards, when this happens I think it's important that I trust the process. I've also*
543 *seen how people who were initially sceptical can change their minds and ask for*
544 *them (image cards) to be used (Inquirer 2).*

545

546 This required the inquirer to champion the approach; by acknowledging it was a
547 different way of doing things and encouraging people to 'give it a go'. Other writers
548 have suggested that being an experienced facilitator is paramount to the success of
549 using images (Gong et al., 2012). There was a desire within the Co-operative Inquiry
550 group to offer a description of Visual Inquiry of sufficient detail and breadth that those
551 reading may feel that this method is possible for them in their context, regardless of
552 previous experience.

553

554 In summary, the overall findings of the Co-operative Inquiry group suggest that the
555 Visual Inquiry approach facilitates connection with participants own experiential
556 knowing and also connection with the people in the group (inquirer and participants).
557 It fosters evocative participation through discussion which stretches and stimulates
558 participants to go in new directions. It also illuminates deeper understanding and
559 appreciation both of one's own experience and that of another's. The approach is seen
560 as accessible and valuable to those at all stages of the learning journey from novice to
561 expert. Visual Inquiry adapts a stance that leans more towards improvisation rather
562 than resolute rules in how the technique is enacted. An example of this leaning towards
563 improvisation and being provocative in Visual Inquiry, is the encouraging of participants

564 in the technique to try it out themselves in their own settings. This improvisational
565 approach has led to the spread of this method in health, social care and academic
566 settings across Scotland. The approach is conducive to further exploration and
567 experimentation in a wide range of situations and is a good resource for opening up
568 dialogue for both expert and novice facilitators (inquirers).

569

570 ***Strengths and possibilities***

571 The quality of the Co-operative Inquiry was enhanced by the collective insights into use
572 of the method and by sharing how experiences differed or assimilated with others.
573 Inquirers brought their own individual 'beliefs' about the validity of this method,
574 together with the opportunity to challenge and defend why it was used. Done
575 collectively as a Co-operative Inquiry group, this supported the criticality in the analysis
576 of the data generated and aided insight into their own practice with this method.

577 Its strength lies in the generative capacity, whereby previously held assumptions are
578 questioned and new possibilities for the future are unearthed (Bushe and Kassam,
579 2005). A new possibility for the use of visual methods in research/facilitation was found
580 to lie its ease of use by those previously unexperienced in this area. The variety of
581 experience and 'skill' of each group member within this Co-operative Inquiry
582 demonstrated the benefit of the Visual Inquiry methods to those new to research or
583 dialogue facilitation.

584

585 Questions that members of the Co-operative Inquiry group remained curious about with
586 regard to using the Visual Inquiry method was how widely this, or similar methods with
587 images, are being used in the area of research/education/practice development. There
588 was also a curiosity around the potential effect that the choice of images in the pack
589 may have on the information elicited, and how the participant's cultural, age and socio-
590 economic contexts may influence their engagement with the images. This curiosity then
591 led to group members wondering about the decision-making process for choice of
592 images when developing a new set of generic images. The question that arose was how
593 choices of images might best reflect and respect the diversity of participants and
594 contexts within which the images may be used.

595

596 There is scope to carry out a more systematic account of participants experiences with
597 using them in different contexts. It is widely written that this method invokes a different
598 response than may be the case if images were not used and so it may be useful to
599 question how we understand which if either of these (with or without image) is the
600 'truest' representation of the persons thoughts/feelings/ experience. While no further
601 studies are planned by the Co-operative inquiry group, there is a strong commitment to
602 ongoing reflection and learning from the process of using this method as part of our
603 development as facilitators. A particular aspect of Visual Inquiry that has been fore
604 fronted in this article is the promotion of an improvisational approach to this method,
605 which includes facilitators encouraging participants to try out this method in their own
606 setting. Again the Co-Inquiry group members have anecdotal stories of the successes
607 reaped from this approach, this however would also benefit from a structured
608 evaluation of the outcomes of 'novices' using this method.

609

610 **CONCLUSION**

611 The aim of this article was to explore the experience of using Visual Inquiry across a
612 range of health and social care settings and amongst inquirers with varying levels of
613 facilitation practice. This knowledge about the experience of the inquirer/researcher is
614 not been found in the literature. ~~Ways in which this method can expand the application
615 of visual methods in research, teaching and practice development were outlined.~~
616 Members of the Co-operative Inquiry group reflected on how Visual Inquiry was
617 accessible, promoted engagement and gave a voice to those who might otherwise
618 experience difficulty expressing their views. Relational and contextual meanings were
619 also explored and a number of key themes emerged from the reflections of the Co-
620 operative Inquiry group: 'evocative participation' and 'illumination'. Findings suggest
621 that using Visual Inquiry influenced relationships in a positive way, facilitating dialogue,
622 meaning making and creating connections. This in turn can help to reduce power
623 imbalances, moving understanding to a deeper level, encouraging trust and safety, and
624 shedding light on experiences both cognitively and emotionally. Moreover, Visual
625 Inquiry is not simply a source of information; it is a resource which can assist inquirers
626 to hold assumptions lightly, making visible the invisible and uncovering authenticity.
627 Suggestions for future research include exploration of the use of visual methods in

628 stimulating dialogue by practice-based (rather than research or teaching) personnel,
629 further improvisational approaches to the use of the method and measures which could
630 support them in feeling confident to use these methods in their working lives.

631

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