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Ara Pachmayer

Kathleen L. Andereck
School of Community Resources and Development Arizona State University

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Introduction

As taking photos to document travel is a common practice of tourists, photo elicitation is a natural technique to use in tourism research. Not only does the photograph serve as a souvenir of travel, but reviewing photographs after a trip may also enhance memories. How photos may impact memory is very useful in an interview setting (Cederholm, 2004; Clark-Ibanez, 2004). Inserting photographs into an interview can help the participant better recall experiences and feelings. Photographs can easily take one back to a specific moment, even aid in recalling the emotions and experiences from when the photograph was taken.

To demonstrate the value of photo elicitation in tourism research, a study where participants submitted and interpreted photographs during interviews is presented. In the study photo elicitation was used as a data collection tool and as a device to encourage talk and discussion. This paper explores the value of photo elicitation in tourism research through a description of the method, a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the method, a presentation of how the method was used in investigating the touristic experiences of study abroad participants, and the impact of the method on the current study.

Literature Review

Photo elicitation is a research method whereby photographs chosen by the researcher or the respondent are presented in an interview situation (Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Harper, 2002). The photo elicitation technique has been employed in a variety of fields and disciplines primarily as either a data collection tool or as part of the data analysis process (Cederholm, 2004; Schwartz, 1989). It may involve several different visual methods including using stock photos, photos taken by the researcher, photos taken by the subject, maps, drawings, or even graffiti (Harper, 2002). Researchers can use the technique to help produce data in interviews or photos themselves can be analyzed for their content in the cases where the respondents introduce photos.

As proposed above, photo elicitation is compatible for multiple topics in tourism research as most tourists take photos to document their travel. Photo elicitation has been used to study the tourist experience in general (Matteucci, 2013), the backpacker experience (Cederholm, 2004) or simply to determine why tourists take photos in the first place and how photos might define the identity of the tourist (Belk & Yeh, 2011). In addition, photo elicitation has been used to discover how residents and tourists view a destination (Garrod, 2008) and how residents view their community after tourism development (Kerstetter & Bricker, 2009).

Advantages of the method

Harper (2002) suggested the potential for using photo elicitation was great though not widely acknowledged. He believed that "images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words" (p. 13) based on the differences in how the brain processes visual versus verbal information. The primary advantages of using the photo elicitation method include the impact on: 1) the research process, 2) the interview process, 3) participants' memories, and 4) the information obtained in the interviews.

The photo elicitation method can facilitate the research process. Use of the method may make participants more interested in participating in research than they would be in a more typical type

of study as many find photography fun or interesting (Garrod, 2008; Matteucci, 2013; Samuels, 2004). In regards to interviewing participants, the use of photo elicitation may also have an advantageous impact on the tone and feel of the interview itself. A one-on-one interview with a stranger can be an awkward experience for both the researcher and the participant. The use of photographs in an interview can work to put the interviewee more at ease as Schwartz (1989) found in her study of a rural Iowa town. Schwartz discussed how looking at photographs during the interview was similar to a "naturally occurring family event" (p.151) like viewing a photo album. It was a normal thing for these participants to do even if the circumstances of the interview may not have been normal. Other researchers have also remarked on how the use of photos in an interview setting make participants feel more comfortable in the interview (Cederholm, 2004; Samuels, 2004). Clark-Ibanez (2004) found that photos could help develop a structure for the interview which can further help in reducing the awkwardness of an interview. By organizing an interview around a selection of photos the researcher can, for example, move to another photo in the event of conversation lulls and enforce an ending point to an interview when all photo selections have been reviewed.

Another advantage of photo elicitation on the interview process involves the impact of viewing the photos on participants' memories. As most people can attest, viewing a photograph can often enhance memories. A participant may be able to answer questions in greater detail when presented with a photograph as the photo can help the mind recall an experience more clearly and deeply (Cederholm, 2004; Clark-Ibanez, 2004). When considering the information obtained in interviews using photo elicitation, much research points to the richness of the resulting data. Samuels (2004), in his study of child monks in Sri Lanka, used photo elicitation as a technique in later interviews he conducted. When comparing the information he learned from the photo elicitation interviews to the earlier interviews where photos were not used, Samuels found the photo interviews yielded data which was "more detailed . . . more meaningful to the participants" (p. 1547) and included greater descriptions. Carlsson (2001), in her methodological paper on photo elicitation, found that when individuals provided explanations of a photo, the quality of the explanation and the expression of feelings was better.

Disadvantages of the method

While the advantages of using photo elicitation seem to far outweigh the disadvantages, there are still limitations, many of which seem to be specific to the nuances of individual studies, including: 1) exaggeration, 2) type of photos submitted, 3) ethical concerns and 3) design of the project.

Carlsson (2001) discussed five arguments that explained the utility of photo elicitation as a research method. Her only specific concern with using photo elicitation was, in her words, "the risk to exaggerate, or read into the photos more than was the intention when taking them" (p.141). However, Carlsson believed this exaggeration only served to enhance the interview data. In his paper, Matteucci (2013) discussed the tourist experience using photos of flamenco dancers and culture he gathered and presented to participants. Participants were asked to view the photos and discuss, among other things, if the photos represented their experiences, if they could understand the feelings of the individuals in the photographs, and to select which photos best represented their experiences. He mentions one drawback to this research in that participants may select photos which portray the experiences in a positive light. This is of course a risk in studies using respondent generated photographs as well because individuals may only submit photos that show themselves or experiences in a positive way.

With respect to ethical considerations when using photographs taken by respondents, it is likely other people will be in the photographs that we can assume do not know they are part of a research project. Another possibility is the respondent could submit photographs of illegal activity.

Lastly, researchers have mentioned the design of the project as a potential disadvantage (Garrod, 2008; Ryan & Ogilvie, 2011). For example, if conducting a photo elicitation study where the investigation is on experiencing nature during autumn and participants take photos during winter that can be a problem for the study. Again, this is primarily a problem with the design of the project which can be mitigated by enforcing a timeline on respondents. Additionally, if participants are required to take photos in situations where they would not naturally do so, that could also be an issue for participants.

Methods

A study was conducted over the course of several semesters to investigate how outside the classroom activities and experiences of study abroad participants impacted their cultural attitudes change and perceived cultural competence. This study was conducted in three parts, the first phase of which was a photo elicitation interview investigating participants' experiences.

Participants were asked to provide up to 10 photos which best represented their experiences in another culture. The use of photo elicitation allowed the participants, rather than the researcher, to define culture and what it meant to them in way that seemed mostly fun and interesting. Photo elicitation is particularly useful in this context. As summed up by Harper (2002), "Photographs appear to capture the impossible: a person gone; an event past. That extraordinary sense of seeming to retrieve something that has disappeared belongs alone to the photograph, and it leads to deep and interesting talk" (p.11) which it certainly did in the case of the current study.

In the current study, participants were recruited in advance of their study abroad programs. Roughly mid-way through the program participants were contacted to submit photos. Upon the end of the program, participants were contacted again to submit photos and to schedule an interview. During in-person interviews, participants were asked to interpret their photographs. The researcher did not interpret the meanings behind the photographs. Instead, photo elicitation was used as a data collection tool and specifically as a device in the interviews to encourage talk and discussion on the personal and complex topics under study.

Interviews were conducted as soon as possible after receipt of photographs to clarify and validate the meanings of the photos to the individual. Metaphors were explored and participants were asked to illustrate with examples from their experiences. For each photo submitted, a set of questions were posed to the participant, some of which were based on questions asked by Carlsson (2001). These questions were semi-structured to ensure consistency in the interviews and also allow for flexibility in probing specific issues for clarification. Additional questions were frequently determined at the time of the interview based on the responses of participants. The standard questions were as follows:

- Interpret the photo for me. Tell me about this photo.

- Why did you take this picture?

- Why did you select this photo to send for the study?

- What does this photo represent to you?

- Do you remember what you were thinking at the time the photo was taken?

- In hindsight, now that you have returned from your study abroad program, does this photo accurately represent your experience?

- If participants submitted more than one photo, they were asked which photo they liked the best and why.

What is unique about how the method was used in this study is that participants supplied their own photographs and were asked during an interview to interpret the photos. The photo elicitation method was used to encourage discussion on personal and complex topics relating to participants' shifts in cultural attitudes and perceptions of cultural competency. Clark-Ibanez (2004) feels that "researchers can use photographs as a tool to expand on questions and simultaneously, participants can use photographs to provide a unique way to communicate dimensions of their lives" (p.1512). Not only did photo elicitation provide a personal study of participants in a unique way, the results informed the development of a questionnaire used in later stages.

Conclusion and Discussion

Evaluation of advantages and disadvantages in the current study

The primary advantages of using photo elicitation from the literature include the impact on the research and interview process, participants' memories, and the information obtained in the interviews. In reviewing the current study with an eye towards evaluating the impact of photo elicitation, it is apparent that the current study benefitted from these advantages.

Regarding facilitation of the research and interview process, it is clear the method of photo elicitation both encouraged participation and open dialog during interviews. The current study involved three phases including completion of an online survey, responding to open-ended question via email or participating in the photo elicitation interview. Recruitment to the photo elicitation interview versus recruitment into other portions of the research was much simpler even though time requirements of the photo elicitation were far greater. After submitting photographs, face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants where each photograph was deeply explored via a set of probing questions referenced above. Interviews typically lasted 45–60 minutes. While ultimately 30 participants completed all aspects of the photo elicitation portion of the study, initially 243 participants indicated they were interested and 35 students submitted photos but declined to be interviewed. Participants were given the option to share their stories through photographs and considering the final number who completed the project it can be assumed this was not an arduous task for most. In addition to participants finding photography a fun activity, many participants may take part in a photo elicitation study because they are eager to show off the photos they took, as was the case in the current study.

The benefit of photo elicitation to the interview process was also clear in the study presented here. Cultural attitudes, cultural competence and other attitudes toward cultural differences explored in the study are already very personal topics with potential for making an interview uncomfortable. Reviewing participants' photographs in the interview helped to calm some interviewees by giving them something to focus on and enabled the researcher to establish a rapport almost instantly with most participants. The same easing of awkward tensions through

the use of photo elicitation was found by other researchers as well (Carlsson, 2001; Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Samuels, 2004).

The impact of the photo elicitation method on participants' memories and the richness of the information obtained was also apparent in the interview process. One respondent in the current study commented during her interview on a photo "It was a spot I found out (about) before I left, and so it was a spot I was anxious to go visit. And, just that experience was so powerful to me, that looking at that photo, I feel like I'm there again." In the current study there were times when participants were asked to interpret a photo and the response was less than deep, for example, when participants simply stated what the photograph was: a photo of turtles or a photo of the Eiffel Tower rather than explaining what the photograph meant. However, for the majority of respondents, photos seemed to make individuals not only more talkative but also more introspective when compared to typical interviews.

Disadvantages

In regards to disadvantages of the photo elicitation method, these included exaggeration, the type of photos submitted, ethical concerns and design of the project. For the most part these concerns did not apply to the current study as primarily these shortcomings of the method are more related to study design and therefore easily corrected.

Concerning the risk of the tendency towards exaggeration (Carlsson, 2001), this was experienced in the current study in the case of several participants who, when discussing their photo submissions, talked about life-changing incidents, made analogies to religious conflicts in the Middle East, or in a few cases were brought to tears. However, as stated earlier, Carlsson found the exaggeration enriched the information obtained in the interviews. This was the case for the current study as well. For example, in one instance, while a participant was reviewing a photo she submitted to the study during the interview, she talked about how the study abroad program had changed her life. We can assume it wasn't the photograph that changed her life, or even that one moment of her experience, but instead her recollection of the entirety of her experiences. By including the photograph in the interview the participant was able to remember deeply personal and meaningful experiences. Essentially, her reaction was amplified by including the photograph.

Another concern of the photo elicitation method is the potential tendency of participants to portray experiences through interviews or photos submitted in a positive light only (Matteucci, 2004). This happened on more than one occasion with the current study as indicated when participants mentioned they submitted a particular photo for the aesthetic quality or because they "looked good" in a particular photo. However, this doesn't diminish the level of discussion in the interviews for the most part, and in some cases led to profound revelations in the data related to the development of self-esteem.

Ethical considerations are of course another concern when photos are involved in research. In the current study the solution to this issue was to instruct participants to avoid submitting photographs which clearly identify others or depicted illegal activities. While there were no incidences of illegal activities in the photos submitted by participants, in a few submitted photos it was possible to clearly identify an individual, both other participants and passers-by. In situations where this happened the interviews continued, but later these photographs were not utilized as part of the overall project. That brings up another benefit of having participants submit multiple photos as well.

There were no particular issues with the design of the current study. For the majority of study abroad participants, taking photographs was a normal event. Particularly in the age of digital photography multiple participants indicated they had taken thousands of photographs on their study abroad program. The difficult part wasn't taking the photograph, it was deciding which ten photos to submit for the study.

There are multiple advantages of using photo elicitation in tourism research. On the other hand, we do find limitations to the photo elicitation technique as well though these disadvantages seem to be specific to aspects of individual studies and may be overcome in the process of research design. In review of both past literature and the impact on the current study, the advantages of the photo elicitation method seem to compensate for limitations of the method. Considering the prevalence of taking photographs as a common tourist activity, tourism researchers will benefit from utilizing photographs to explore deeper emotions and feelings on a variety of complex topics, for example the experiences of tourists in another culture.

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