FAQ 31: What are some good approaches to using creative visual research methods with children?

What's the issue?

In recent years, researchers from a wide range of disciplines, for example, sociology, psychology, media studies, social policy, education, and health, have shown a growing interest in making use of the new creative visual methods in social research. Such approaches have been especially popular while doing research involving

made, be more focused on finding out WHY they have decided to make such an artefact and WHAT the artefact meant for the maker.

- Do not only focus on the oral (or written) interpretations of the participants and the group and by doing so, dismiss the visual dimension of their study. Rather, search for additional theories and ways for understanding the data produced through creative methods.

- As the personal meanings and perceptions communicated through such an approach are often ambiguous, obscure, and ever changing, you cannot take the role of omniscient expert. Rather, be creative, much like the method. Giving participants plenty of options in the process of creation and accepting deviations from the original plan to follow interesting sub-topics are just a few aspects that can benefit the research.

Examples of a study using visual methods

Our experiences with creative visual methods suggest that such an approach helps to generate respondent curiosity and maintain their interest in the study procedure as children and young people sincerely take pleasure in the research process. Furthermore, as the participants can easily modify their creative works, they seemed to feel in control over their own process of expression and thereby also more at ease with the need to comment on their own experiences and perceptions.

When using creative methods (especially in research with teens), the moderator should be prepared to talk about material that could be considered provocative: researching the perceived persona of an online pervert (in-depth interviews combined with previously made individual drawings of online perverts) presented a situation where an interviewee had drawn a penis in detail. As the interviewee explained – it was partly tongue-in-cheek humour and partly his real perception. In addition, he had drawn a picture, more common to the standards of that sample, of a filthy-looking man on the other side of the paper, in case the drawing of a penis was 'a bit too much'. Moderators of such studies should be prepared to give extra confirmation about the absence of 'right' answers in creative exercises.

The moderator can help the interviewees feel more comfortable and open up. In one study it was evident in many parts of the discussion when high school students were a bit reluctant to talk about certain things and behaviours. The moderator provided personal examples that offered a possibility to relate and feel more relaxed to talk about their own experiences, for instance, where participants described their normal web routines: Moderator: 'In terms of time, how much time do you spend online every day? Or are you online every day?'/F5: 'Oh, this is brutal, I'm afraid to say it.'/Moderator: 'So that you won't feel bad, I can tell you mine. I added my hours up and well ... on average I'm online for 12 hours per day...'/F5: 'Okay, then mine really isn't so bad...'. (Maria Murumaa-Mengel, Estonia)

References and further resources

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