Collaborative methodological reflection: disrupting the ethical practices of a creative method in higher education research

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Collaborative methodological reflection: Disrupting the ethical practices of a creative method in higher education research

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Abstract

Utilising processes of collaborative reflection, the authors explored their use of photo-elicitation by replicating the participant experience from their own research. The resultant discussion led to the emergent topic of ethical research practice, which includes both broader concerns and specific considerations around employing creative methods. Drawing on the framework of the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines, this paper critically analyses the literature around ethical research practice before presenting the findings from this reflexive project. Directly responding to calls for ethical innovation in the context of creative methods, this paper makes specific recommendations around how ethical research practice can incorporate reflective approaches that complement the review processes of ethical review boards by further protecting participants and facilitating researcher understanding and development.

Introduction and context

The case study that inspired this paper explored the experiences of staff and students at a higher education institution (HEI) within the United Kingdom. That research focused on the changes to learning and teaching spaces during the Covid-19 pandemic (Griffiths et al, 2021; Griffiths et al, in press). Participants from across the institution took part in either a focus group or a semi-structured interview. Adopting processes of photo-elicitation (Glaw et al, 2017), the researchers invited each participant to take a photograph of their current home working/learning environment. With consent, the researchers drew on the participants' images within their respective focus group or interview to expand narratives through encouraging reflective discussion.

Whilst undertaking the case study project, the researchers experienced an 'ethical moment' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004) in relation to the use of participants' images and reflected on the implications of using creative methods. The authors designed a concurrent reflexive project to explore the benefits and limitations of the researchers' methodological approach. These reflections are the focus of this paper and intend to

extend the discussions of ethical research practices, especially when using non-conventional research approaches.

The importance of research ethics was one of the themes emerging from this reflexive project, and the paper makes recommendations for developing ethical approval processes. In this paper, we will explore some of the ethical issues around collecting and drawing on visual data to provide context for our 'ethical moment' which arose during the case study project.. Second, we will outline the methodological approach that we adopted to support our reflections and offer it as a model for future research reflexivity. Finally, we will report our findings and make recommendations for the future development of research ethics-related approaches.

Case study context: Ethics and visual data

The ethics of drawing on visual data for research has been widely explored (see, for example, Facca et al, 2020; Wiles et al, 2012; Daniels, 2008). The use of images as data has a long history in anthropological research (Banks, 2014). The resultant ethical controversies, which include issues around consent and deception, raise important questions for researchers wishing to employ such methods. Visual data can be collected in various ways including researcher-created, participant-created, and the use of 'found' images (Banks, 2014; Wiles et al, 2012). Wiles (2008) notes that if the intention is to draw on the photographs to generate participant discussions, or 'photo-elicitation', this may warrant different considerations than 'autophotography' (Glaw et al, 2017) which involves the researchers treating the photographs as data. This paper concentrates on participant-created images for photo-elicitation, since this was the approach taken in the case study..

Inviting participants to take and share their own photographs confers a number of potential benefits. These include: empowering participants; increasing their enjoyment; fostering their engagement with different psychological processes that encourage richer discussion; (Miller, 2015); and critical (Ronzi et al, 2016) dialogue; and enabling them to express what has significance for them (Guillemin and Drew, 2010). Whilst concerns have been previously raised about the costs associated with 'participant photography' (Allen, 2012 p1), recent research highlights how a general familiarity with camera phones can encourage participant engagement (Raby et al, 2018).

However, there are also well-documented philosophical and practical challenges that are associated with this creative method. An important philosophical critique regarding utilising images in research is the 'Euro-American' cultural focus on 'seeing' for meaning-making (Banks, 2014), which other cultures may not share. This could have implications for inclusivity when recruiting research participants. Euro-American researchers should also be careful to reflect on their culturally constructed emphasis on visual information when designing their research methodology and analysing their data (Banks, 2014). Practical challenges include the need for researcher recognition that the context within which participants are being invited to take photographs may influence their decisions as to what to include within the image and in what manner (Power et al, 2013).

There is also a risk that participants' eagerness to please may distort or edit the content of the images by focussing on trying to produce what they think the researcher wants, rather than what is important to them (Ronzi et al, 2016). Related to this, societal norms may encourage participants to stage their photographs in bids to present themselves in the best light (Guillemin and Drew, 2010). Recognising this potential for misrepresentation, previous research encourages researchers to consider not just what is captured within the photograph but also what might be absent from it (Meo, 2010).

Theliterature also indicates how one of the most problematic areas for researchers seeking to draw on participant-generated photographs relates to the application of ethics approval processes given the significant variance between the standpoints of ethics review boards and researchers (McAreavey and Muir, 2011), particularly in a creative research methods context. Pitt suggests that ethics review boards may be ill-suited to research involving visual methods due to ' views of the model researcher 'as an objective and disinterested observer', a cost-benefit approach to decision-making, and their perceptions of humans as 'independent and equal'. (2014, p311). Pitt (2014) also acknowledges how visual researchers can experience developing ethical issues throughout the course of a project, which the traditional solitary ethics review board model does not support. Similarly, Miller points to 'conservative positivist perspective[s]' inadequate comprehension, and subjective procedures and ensuant disparity in decision-making (2015 p9). The breadth of ethical issues associated with participatory visual research, (including anonymity, consent, and dissemination), combined with the associated array of 'frameworks, professional guidance, regulation, and legal rights and duties' (Wiles et al, 2008) may compound such problems and potentially discourage researcher-engagement. Previous research also highlights how researchers should familiarise themselves with the ethical review process, and build their relationship with ethical review boards, perhaps by volunteering to become reviewers (Orimadegun, 2020).

To help overcome such ethics-related issues, researchers need to consider their rationale for including participant-generated photography within their research design (Miller, 2015). In the case study project, this rationale was re-questioned by the researchers during their 'ethical moment' and influenced the decision to explore ethics and creative methods in more detail.

Reflexive Project: Methodology for reflexive intervention

Whilst the rationale for participant-generated photography was discussed at the outset of the case study, the research highlighted a need for further reflexive intervention. The two case study researchers invited a third independent researcher to join them for this concurrent reflexive project. Utilising the principles of collaborative reflexivity and reflexivity (see, for example, Dickinson et al, 2020), we applied Marshall et al.'s (2010) framework to explore the ethics of our approach (see table 1).

First, we assigned the focus of the reflexive activity as the photo-elicitation methodology that the researchers adopted for the case study. We were granted

ethical approval for this reflexive project through an amendment to the researchers' original ethics application for the case study. Responding to previous calls for researchers to mitigate ethical review boards' potential unfamiliarity with creative research designs (see, for example, Orimadegun, 2020), we took part in this reflexive project as participants. We assigned ourselves roles, either 'active researcher participant' or 'independent observer participant', to reflect the extent of our involvement in the case study. Transcending the regulatory emphasis on institutional ethical supervision and re-focusing on the elements of integrity, transparency, and respect (Nind et al, 2013), the reflexive project involved each of us, as researcher participants, experiencing the creative methods that had been adopted for the case study to understand the format from the participant's perspective.

We engaged in two collaborative reflexivity discussions: one before the interview (reflexive discussion 1) and one afterwards (reflexive discussion 2) using Marshall et al's (2010) framework as a guide. The first reflexive discussion had two foci; introspection and intersubjective reflection. Introspection concerns the researcher's personal experience with the aim of making the links between personal experiences and knowledge claims more explicit (Marshall et al. 2010). Intersubjective reflection considers the interrelationship between the researcher and their participants. This encompasses personal characteristics, including those which are fixed at the point the research is undertaken (for example, sex and age) and those which are malleable, such as dress and social interactions (Marshall et al, 2010). As a result of the first reflexive discussion, the researchers involved in the case study incorporated a question into the focus group and interview schedule to seek participants' perspectives on the inclusion of creative methods. This reflects the approach advocated by Atilla and Edge (2017) for development of reflexivity approaches beyond the initial research design stage.

The second reflexive discussion comprised three parts: collaborative reflection, social critique, and conscientious reflection (Marshall et al. 2010). Collaborative reflection identified the need to consider the participants' feelings about participating in creative methods. The researcher participants also discussed power differentials; both in terms of the researcher-participant relationship and in relation to whom the researchers might be inadvertently excluding from the research. Finally, the reflexivity project would be classified as insider research; 'that which is conducted within a social group, organization or culture of which the researcher is also a member' (Greene, 2014. p.1). Marshall et al. (2010) emphasise the importance of remaining alert to ethical risk for those undertaking insider research, where boundaries can blur and participants may disclose or exhibit unethical practice. Consequently, the researcher participants discussed the steps that they had taken to mitigate this risk in the second reflexive discussion.

Before each of these reflexive discussions, the researcher participants prepared written narratives following an agreed structure and shared these written narratives with the others. Each of the reflexive discussions were framed around these written narratives with individuals providing verbal summaries and answering follow up questions from the others to challenge assumptions and achieve depth of coverage (Legard et al, 2003).

Table 1: Stages and activities of the reflexive project

Stage	Activities
Identify focus of reflexive activity	• Participants' perspectives of photo-elicitation research methods during case study research project • Amendment to carry out concurrent reflexive project submitted to ethics review board
Create immersion	• Two researchers undertake the case study research with staff/student participants • One independent observer (akin to supervisor input in Marshall et al., 2010) observes sample of recorded research with staff/student participants
Reflexive analysis #1	• All three researcher participants (the researchers and the independent observer) engage in first reflexive discussion
Experience being researched	• All three researcher participants take photographs and collectively follow the focus group/interview process adopted for the case study
Reflexive analysis #2	• All three researcher participants engage in second reflexive discussion

Reflexive Insights and Recommendations

As researcher participants, we found the reflexive discussions insightful and challenging. In this section, we summarise our reflections in alignment with the British Educational Research Association, Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA Guidelines) (2018, 4th edition). This themed content into five sections: responsibility to participants; responsibilities to sponsors, clients and stakeholders in research; responsibilities to the community of educational researchers; responsibilities for publication and dissemination; and responsibilities for researchers' wellbeing and development.

Responsibility to participants

One of the benefits of insider research is the existing trust between the researcher and the researched which may help facilitate participation (Marshall et al, 2010). Our experiences also highlight how the use of photo-elicitation can empower participants to decide how to represent their world visually (Glaw et al, 2017) and increase their sense of involvement (Guillemin and Drew, 2010). At times, we experienced a sense of worry that we were 'saying the right things' and noted how the research participants in the case study had disclosed similar concerns, for example, 'well, I

wasn't really sure about the picture I took of the learning environment, whether that was really right or not'.

We reflected on the perceived experiences of the research participants during the case study and noted that our method highlighted privilege, and therefore differences (for example privacy, technology, and access to daylight) and potentially disadvantage. We reflected on our experiences of being a researcher participant, describing feelings of enjoyment and catharsis. This was potentially due to our 'insider' researcher status; we had similar experiences to those of our participants and were able to enjoy the benefit of participating as a result (Marshall et al, 2010). We shared our photographs, although some of us consciously edited our location. The research participants in the case study also revealed similar apprehension, for example:

> 'you just think, well, I'm going to potentially show this to I don't know how many other people. So just make sure it looks neat… you know how you just scan it initially just to say, what is there that might be embarrassing or out of place or inappropriate'.

We questioned the effectiveness of the research 'brief' and specifically the 'debrief' aspect of the data collection. We explored whether creative methods required more than an information sheet to apprise consent (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). For instance, recognising that participants may be unsure about requirements, the researchers involved in the case study included an example image of one of their own workspaces within the recruitment materials. We reflected on the formality of ethical statements, especially those recited at the beginning of sessions which can reaffirm researcher-researched distinctions and shift the focus back towards the researcher. We considered the balance between rapport building and ethical practices as essential in creative methods. We also wondered how often researchers followed up with participants beyond sharing findings and outcomes or member checking (for the researcher's benefit to ensure trustworthiness) (see, for example, Birt et al, 2016) to discuss the impact of the method on the participant, and considered the need for reflexive practices to gather these insights.

Responsibilities to the community of educational researchers

We discussed the merits of a reflexive journal as one way to 'display the investigator's mind process, philosophical position and bases of decisions about the inquiry' (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p109). However, the purposeful reflection presented in this paper allowed the researchers time and space for an 'in the moment' discussion of methodology, and highlighted areas for development alongside examples of where reflection and adaptation already existed (for example, through organic discussions between members of a research team during data collection). This practice supports the BERA (2018, p29) aim to 'protect the integrity and reputation of educational research by ensuring that they conduct their research to the highest standards'. A focus on producing, writing, and disseminating findings has the potential for inhibiting thinking time, energy, and corresponding diary availability that are needed for adopting a deeper, collaborative reflexivity approach. Appraisal processes or personal development planning models could lend themselves to discussing the research context for the benefit of the research, the

researched, and the researcher. The best models for appraisal encourage the identification of formal, dedicated space for reflexivity and goal setting, but tend to be underpinned by an ongoing series of informal communications.

Whilst it became clear that some of us engaged in requests for research participation (most often surveys), and most of us had explored creative methods in training or conference workshops, none of the researcher participants had been a participant in research employing creative methods. We struggled with the challenges of being researched due to our immersion in the world of research and engagement was, at times, influenced by our own critical thinking. BERA (2018 p8) suggest that 'researchers should not undertake work for which they are not competent' and we include experience and impact in the definition of competence.

We include those conducting ethical review within the community of researchers. As previously referenced (see Miller, 2015; Wiles, 2008), when submitting a proposal for research with images, this tends to generate queries to test the ethics of the project more robustly than an interview or focus group schedule. Whilst scrutiny is important, this should be from an informed position and constructive in nature. As Brown at al (2020, p747) suggest '…the difference between foe and friend lies in the quality of communication, clear systems and a culture of respectful mutual learning'.

Responsibilities to sponsors, clients and stakeholders in research

The BERA (2018) guidelines ground ethical practices include the sound understanding of the proposed methods, which must be justifiable and have considered possible alternatives. Creative methods should not be adopted simply because they are interesting, particularly when considering the risk of cultural normativity (Banks, 2014). As such, the discussion of methods and the dissemination of findings to stakeholders – closing the research loop - is essential for future application and learning.

The transparency of lessons learnt is important; pedagogic research in higher education can be biased towards the reporting and publication of positive outcomes (Dawson and Dawson 2018). As researcher participants, we were able to share our sentiments with each other. A sense of equals has been created, perhaps mediated by the sharing of photographs and insights into our lived experiences of working remotely. But there may be pressures from funders or wider stakeholders for less transparency through a fear of critique . This does not help future research practices or the development of diversity and innovation in methodology. Whilst not all reflexive notes are note-worthy, a supportive culture should operate for disclosure of lessons learnt, when appropriate. As Nind et al (2013) state, 'innovation is as much about reflexivity as about new techniques in themselves' (p657).

Furthermore, the research loop should be closed between researchers and participants. During the reflexive discussions, we considered sharing findings with participants; previous experience had involved participants' eagerness to see the final outputs of their engagement. In the case study, one of the research participants was keen to understand the potential impact of the research on institutional policies and processes, stating 'I just want to know if anything is going to stay in place and,

you know, like will it be to save money? Because I think we need a bit of a refund as well.'

This targeted dissemination could generate discussions between peers, who then act as advocates for participation in future research, in our case with students and staff in a HEI.

Responsibilities for publication and dissemination
In the focus groups and interviews, pre-consent was obtained to share participants' photographs. Participants were also given the opportunity to decline verbally or through that online chat function. We reflected on whether participants felt uncomfortable sharing in a focus group session. The participant-generated photographs were often sent in advance and collated as research artefacts.

In our reflexive discussion, we recognised that some students tidied up (an element of 'distortion' described by Ronzi, 2016) for their photographs; some said they had not, but we might assume that they had (note the full wastepaper baskets); some commented on the 'mess' we could not see (the floor); some did not share a photo at all due to privacy concerns. The participants were perhaps aware of power dynamics and specifically judgements that they actively sought to avoid – not showing overdue library books on photographs was one such example.

A photograph is fixed, but circumstances and environments are not and the ethics of collecting photographs are more complex. When participants give consent to share their photograph, it could be repeatedly viewed and judged by outsiders with no recourse for changed circumstances. This is different from sharing views in a focus group because those views are rarely published wholesale. In fact, this would be discouraged due to the risk of identifying participants inadvertently. Data is filtered through the researcher's narrative. With an image, this is not possible and raises the question of whether seeking consent as a one-off is appropriate. Member checking for 're-consent' may be considered best practice for researchers collecting visual data (Birt et al, 2016, p1804).

Responsibilities for researchers' wellbeing and development
During the written reflections one of us described their participation as an expression of months of frustration and resentment about how work had infiltrated their home. They described how they felt better following the interview, and were pleased that they might have provided a similar opportunity for participants. The group then discussed the potential impact on the researcher of 'taking on' these negative feelings.

With insider research such as this, researchers may not be able to forget the research experience, and this may influence (positively or negatively) all other interactions. Both active researchers considered photographs of their workplace colleagues. One of us explained that as the researcher, they felt they knew the researched a bit better through the window of the photograph:

> 'I found myself thinking about the photograph of their setting whilst in the [online] meeting, remembering the features, even though they were not directly in view.'

The benefits of insider research include an inherent understanding of the environment for staff, and sometimes students. However, considering the diverse nature of the institution, the risk of assumed knowledge is omnipresent. There was a level of relaxation and trust that developed during the role of researcher participant. Whilst there are benefits for the research findings, the researcher and or/the researched might inadvertently reveal more that they would want shared publicly.

Whilst no negative experiences were reported in this project, the potential for adverse effects is possible, coupled with a more intensive research experience as a result of employing creative methods. BERA (2018) suggests that 'safeguarding the physical and psychological wellbeing of researchers is part of the ethical responsibility of employing institutions and sponsors' (2018, p35).

Conclusion

This paper has explored, via a process of collaborative reflection, the use of creative methods from the perspectives of the researcher and the researched. Drawing on BERA's ethical guidelines (2018) to structure the findings, we have included in the table below six recommendations for the development of an ethical *process* for creative research, to respond to calls for ethical reflection to move beyond 'one-off' events (Wiles et al, 2012).

Table 2: Recommendations from the reflexive project

No.	Recommendation
1.	As a minimum, the participant information sheet should include details of the potential impact of the proposed method. In addition, interview questions should explore how the method (sharing a photograph of a home working space) makes a participant feel. We suggest applying the principles of a reflexive diary (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to facilitate more organic reflexive discussion throughout the research.
2.	Researchers should participate in a variety of research methods, specifically those that they aim to employ, and research reflexivity should be recognised as part of continuing professional development (CPD).
3.	Ethical reviewers should be trained to promote transparency and communication during the ethical review process.
4.	Lessons learnt should be disseminated beyond small limitations sections within publications. We encourage a culture of sharing which can develop from more considered reflexive practices.
5.	As with other visual methods (such as digital stories Austen et al, 2019), we recommend obtaining specific consent to publish. We also ask that researchers and reviewers consider when and how images are published, asking

	themselves 'are the images necessary for readers to see?'
6.	Researchers employing creative methods should consider the potential impact on wellbeing at the point of design.

Recommendations 3 and 5 are focussed on developing the existing ethical review processes, in line with our belief that reflexive approaches to ethics should not supersede what already exists, but to include a consideration of the long-term ethical practice of researchers and reviewers (Wiles et al., 2012). Our findings emphasise that approval processes should aim to be a continual dialogue between researcher, reviewer, and participant. Recommendation 6 invites researchers and reviewers to consider the wellbeing of participants and research staff at the point of design. Furthermore, Recommendation 1 encourages qualitative researchers to routinely include questions which encourage participant reflection on the methodology as part of the data collection process, with the goal of informing future practice. Empathic research practice can be promoted through Recommendation 2, particularly when this practice is supported through formal CPD processes. All of these recommendations are underpinned be giving researchers space to report their reflections of their methodologies as a routine aspect of publication, as suggested in Recommendation 4.

In conclusion, we would encourage ethical review boards to extend their knowledge of the practicalities of creative methods and enhance the review process from critical to constructive. This would include prompting researchers to adapt briefing and de-briefing mechanisms, enquiring about the inclusion of reflexive discussions/interviews in the research process and specifically examining the publication suggestions for visual artefacts. In addition, we ask that line managers make space for and encourage/reward researchers to be participants in the research of others. The wellbeing of researchers, at the point of design, implementation and publication, should also be embedded within these supportive discussions. We also hope that publishers dedicate space to lessons learnt, research failures, and reflexive insights to promote a culture of transparency in creative methods.

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