The use of digital technologies in the co-creation process of photo elicitation

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Abstract

Purpose – This article approaches the possibilities of photo elicitation as a technique for social research in the landscape of technology-mediated instantaneous interpersonal communication.

Design/methodology/approach – This case study, which involved persons with prison experience in the process of returning to the community, demonstrates how participant-generated photographs made with mobile handheld electronic devices and the meanings participants have attached to them allowed the research to take a co-creative turn.

Findings – The data analyzed show the potential of photo elicitation to build a link between researcher and researched that empowers the latter with agency in designing the results and also throughout the research process as a whole, thus allowing the former to reach a deeper level of understanding of the research participants' social reality.

Originality/value – The research conducted showcases the possibilities of this technique to approach the field of emotions from the ethnography and how they can build knowledge – especially in the work with vulnerable populations in vulnerable contexts – and generate new categories of analysis.

Keywords Vulnerability, Photo elicitation, Social research, Ethnography, Digital technologies

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Positing photography as a "testimony" (Crespo and Pulido, 2014, p. 145) of someone or something in a particular time and place, it's clear that photographs allow us to tell about society (Becker, 2007, p. 7), or as is the case when deploying photo elicitation, to get people to talk about society.

John Collier Jr. formally introduced the technique of photo elicitation in the social sciences in a study on the acculturation of Franco-Acadian immigrants in the Canadian town of Bristol, during which he made photographs that were later used in interviews with members of that community. Upon comparing interviews conducted with and without the visual aid of photographs, Collier Jr. asserted its function as a "language bridge" (1957, p. 858) between interviewer and interviewee, allowing the former to easily grasp complex dimensions of the

content of said photographs while also prompting the latter's "latent memory" (Collier, 1957, p. 858) regarding particular events or aspects related to his/her personal or professional life. Later, Collier Jr. and Malcolm Collier highlighted the communicational properties of photographs in interviews as both interviewed and interviewer engage in "exploring the photographs together" (1990 [1967], p. 105), triggering an interaction that can break the flow of an otherwise "formal" interview – formal in the sense of questions being asked and responses being provided verbally – and make the participant more at ease as the focus of the interview shifts from their personal knowledge about a particular social phenomenon to what they know about what's in a particular photograph.

Departing from research carried out in 2020 and from the theoretical contributions of several fields of research, we'll explore the potential of photography and photo elicitation in qualitative research, namely in ethnography with vulnerable populations in vulnerable contexts and also how digitalization can empower people and blur the line between researcher and researched.

Theoretical framework

Pauwels (2015) differentiates four types of visual materials – not just photographs – used by social scientists according to their origin: found materials (e.g. movies or *photobooks*), researcher-generated materials (e.g. drawings or photographs made by the researcher), secondary research-generated material (e.g. photographs made by a researcher in another study) and participant-generated material (e.g. photographs made by a research participant during a study). The examples to follow will highlight how photo elicitation can accommodate the use of all these types of materials if needed or will be.

Observing the current literature of the social sciences, we find many examples of the use of photo elicitation in anthropology (Fischer, 2016; van der Does *et al.*, 1992), sociology (Sutherland, 2022; Valle, 2022), tourism (Chang *et al.*, 2023; Farkić and Kennell, 2021), leisure studies (Kono *et al.*, 2019; Kyle and Chick, 2007), environmental sciences (Sherren *et al.*, 2011; Szaboova *et al.*, 2020), media and communication (Cabalquinto, 2020; Kong *et al.*, 2015), business (Marcella-Hood, 2021), design (Reddy-Best *et al.*, 2021), geography (Edensor and Sumartojo, 2018; Mellegård and Boonstra, 2020), psychology (Bowes-Catton, 2021; Helman *et al.*, 2019), cultural studies (Lenette and Boddy, 2013; Tremlett, 2013), gender studies (Capous-Desyllas and Johnson-Rhodes, 2018; Trinh, 2020), education (Lamb *et al.*, 2016; Nichols and Stahl, 2021), sex education (Allen, 2011, 2013), health (Glaw *et al.*, 2017; Smith, 2015) and sports (Argüelles *et al.*, 2021; Hurly and Walker, 2019), and it is often employed in research conducted by multidisciplinary teams (Kurtz *et al.*, 2019; Mannay *et al.*, 2018).

When solely research-generated photographs are used in photo-elicited interviews, researchers might miss key dimensions of their "research setting" (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004, p. 1509) – i.e. the social reality of their research participants. As such, some researchers (Copes *et al.*, 2018; Sanders, 2020) have combined research and participant-generated photographs in their studies, while others (Mason and Davies, 2009; Woodward and Jenkings, 2011) have employed photo elicitation, relying exclusively on archive photographs selected by their research participants. Furthermore, some scholars (Alexander, 2013; Hilário and Augusto, 2019) have sought to expand the scope of participation and involvement of research participants by providing them with photographic cameras so that, through their framing of social reality, they could make photographs informed by the research objectives.

As noted by some authors (Banks, 2001; Harper, 2005[1998]; Pink, 2009[2001]), photo elicitation can provide an opportunity for collaboratively producing knowledge grounded on the common and shared discussion of visual materials. And as social interactions are increasingly technology-mediated, some scholars are already paving innovative ways of conducting research: using online tools, social media platforms and digital repositories to

source research participants (Sølvberg and Jarness, 2019; Williams, 2010); displaying images and interviewing research participants (Dam, 2022; Zamantakis, 2020); storing and making images available to research participants (Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006; Orr and Phoenix, 2015) and using online social media platforms as a milieu of study (Marcella-Hood, 2021; Smith *et al.*, 2012).

To explore the possibilities of photo elicitation namely the expanded field of possibilities of image making and meaning-attachment after the introduction of mobile handhelds into our lives, one practical example of the use of this technique sourced from a research project will be approached in detail.

Methodological framework: the photo-elicited encounter in the construction of life narratives

The case study presented here was carried out within the framework of a broader research project that analyzed the processes of insertion of people with prison experience in the residential context through its personal narratives, conceptualized here as life-course stories told in the first person that frame "guiding images of the self" (Ammerman and Williams, 2012, p. 118) in and between both the personal and public dimensions of our social reality. Participant observation was used alongside other techniques that have allowed the co-construction of nine life narratives (seven men and two women).

Working with vulnerable people involves special care: first, the researcher made a visit to the residential integration centers [1] so that she could get to know participants – and vice-versa – and talk to them about the research project; second, a follow-up visit to the residential integration centers to further discuss the research project and collect the informed consent [2] of those who've decided to participate voluntarily and anonymously; third, and lastly, the places where the interviews took place were agreed upon with each of the participants so that they could feel comfortable and safe. As the complexity of any social phenomenon is best understood through long and informal repeated encounters (Mata-Codesal *et al.*, 2020), five meetings were held with each participant, consisting of an in-depth interview lasting between one and a half and two hours. The first interview focused on the participants' lives before their entry into prison, the key events in their lives during the time they were incarcerated and their first emotions upon release. The second meeting focused on their narration of their experiences after being released, encompassing topics such as daily life in the insertion residence, job seeking, the recovery of social networks and the search for new support, and on this occasion, participants were also asked to make photographs of their daily lives in order to analyze them in subsequent meetings. The third interview approached participants' future expectations and the meanings they've attached to their inclusion in society after being incarcerated. The fourth meeting was devoted to the analysis of the photographs, and on the last session, participants mapped where the insertion residence was located based on a pre-defined subtitle in order to gauge their feeling of belonging to the community. We'll focus on the photo elicitation encounters and the results obtained by asking the participants to make photographs, who used their *smartphones* to collect and send images and documents.

During the researcher's fieldwork period, participants made photographs – the material collected ranges from photographs of an existing photograph, photographs taken before the research and images posted on their social media account – which they've later shared with her in different ways. The choice to include photographs that weren't selected or sent by participants' during the fieldwork period – but which were shown by a participant in their *smartphone* during a photo elicitation session – was also made. The collected data were used to address issues and construct meanings concerning job insecurity, geographical distance namely maintaining family ties, urban segregation, motherhood during a period of semi-liberty, loneliness, fear and anguish in persons with prison experience.

We'll explore a photo-elicited interview conducted with one of the research participants, whom we'll call Mateo. The work with Mateo took place between November 2020 and January 2021, comprising around 11 h of recorded conversations in the meetings the researcher had with him – including the photo elicited interview which lasted 2 h – four of which were conducted at the insertion residence, and the fifth and final one occurred in a university classroom.

After two meetings and establishing a certain degree of intimacy, the researcher asked Mateo to make photographs of his daily life that reflected his daily practices for at least two weeks, giving him a thematic script to facilitate the understanding of what was to be photographed: important people in his life, his experience at the insertion residence, his neighborhood, places of leisure, the meaning of confinement, desires and future expectations, among others. And so, Mateo used the cameras embedded in his *smartphone* and *tablet* to photograph what was important in his life and what he wanted to talk about, sending the researcher the photographs he made via *WhatsApp*. After approximately two weeks, Mateo made 11 photographs, which were later printed and introduced in the photo-elicited interview during which he was asked to describe each of the images regarding the meaning and emotions they generated, thus constructing a narrative. So that participants could freely build their narrative, only two open questions were asked: Why did you choose to take this photograph? What does it mean to you?

During this stage of the research, the researcher's role was to provide support, namely probing participants' difficulties in making photographs as well as accessing the overall unfolding of this task to ensure it met the overarching objectives of the research. Care was also taken to prevent significant delays between sending the photographs and conducting the interview, where these materials would be analyzed and discussed in order to prevent the loss of sensations, memories, thoughts or feelings participants associated with the moment they've made them.

Results: Mateo, distance(s), migration and vulnerability

Mateo arrived in Spain shortly before 2012, and we've met through the association that manages one of the residential resources of the network of services for people in social exclusion of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa. He was first imprisoned in November 2016 after committing several criminal acts in 2012, and at the time of the research, he was living in the inclusion residence for almost a year before he was permanently released.

We'll share three images – each one presented alongside the title and subtitle Mateo gave them – that exemplify significant aspects of his daily practices, which in turn have been categorized according to the themes that emerged in the results obtained.

The intimacy of the social

> I think it brings me peace, and I find peace in this kind of place. I feel like my mind switches off there; I don't feel so pressured. I wish that one day when you come, for example, today, we could have been there, right where I'm sitting right now. (Interview with Mateo; December 2020)

While analyzing his own photograph (see Plate 1), Mateo reflects on a more subjective and emotional aspect of his life-course as a migrant in the process of returning to the community. Given that photo elicitation favors reflexivity in the knowledge production process (Mata-Codesal *et al.*, 2020), it's worth noting how Mateo's dialog focuses on bodily aspects such as the feelings of "peace" or "disconnection." Furthermore, in inviting the researcher to share this space of tranquility with him, Mateo signals a significant link between researcher and researched, which is a hallmark trait of photo elicitation – according to Harper (2002),

Source(s): A photograph off of Mateo's personal archive,
shared with his permission

Plate 1.
Through my shadow

photography stimulates and releases emotions that shape the lives of research participants, opening spaces for a deep conversation between them that brings language and discourse close and makes possible the essence of ethnographic work: the immersion of the researcher in the social world of the people he researches.
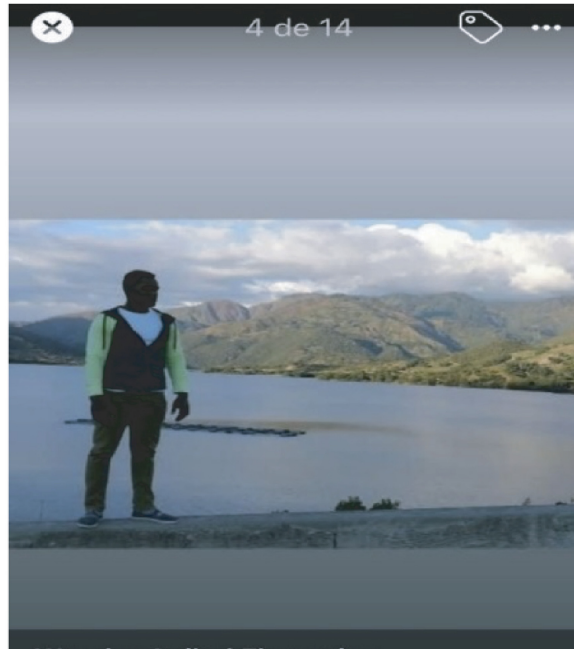
> I think that when I am alone . . . -I don't have my head here, I think I have my mind in my country, when I don't see something fixed, a house, a car, I can move around. I don't know if I've mentioned it at some point, but I think that being a foreigner in my case is a pain in the ass (Interview with Mateo; December 2020).

By immersing himself in his own photograph, Mateo realizes his condition as an incarcerated migrant and the difficulties this entails, and through the act of becoming aware of his situation, he becomes empowered.

Connecting with the past, recovering the origin

> This photo is a joke. The fact is that I stole this photo from Facebook, and I used to send it to my brother, because in my village nowadays everybody takes photos here. I've always been used to going there, and now when I see the photos, I don't think it's out of envy exactly, but I say to my little brother, but everyone has a photo of this now and I don't have one! Send me a photo of the place, and I'll embed my image and make a montage! I would give anything to be there, to go to that place. That's one of the places in my life that I miss (Interview with Mateo; December 2020). 38

As Harper states, photography can capture "the impossible" (Harper, 2002, p. 23), such as an experience from the past or the feeling of being able to relive it. Through a photograph posted on his account on a social media platform (see Plate 2), Mateo brings together and co-constructs a narrative about his migration process, a theme initially not identified as an object of study for the research project. As such, Mateo's participation led to the incorporation of new themes in the research, thus altering the course of the photo-elicited interview. And photo elicitation, as Ammerman and William (2012) posit, can transform the research process and introduce new categories of analysis. In the lines shared below, Mateo narrates past events in his country, his departure from it and his arrival in Spain.

Plate 2.
Memories and places
I miss

Source(s): A photograph off of Mateo's personal archive, shared with his permission

> I have some photos when I was one year old right there, in that same place, I'm going to see if my mother will pass them on to me. I had a plot of land and my things before I came, I had my car, and I said I was going to try my luck for a few years. I had my whole life planned to go back there, but the judicial times broke my life (Interview with Mateo; December 2020).

As Rose (2003) points out, photographs are valuable because they carry traces of past events that extend over time: here-now/there-then. As such, photo elicitation allows us to bring together and contrast the past, present and future instantly, in essence traveling backwards in time and evoking memories through photographs in order to reveal information and meanings that wouldn't be easily accessible through other techniques.

Parenthood, distance and new technologies

> What it means to me is that the engine, the anesthetic, the painkiller, or the ibuprofen of my sorrows is my son. He never sent me anything, ever a voice note, ever! I was left as if Shakira had written to me, no! More! Madonna! (Interview with Mateo; December 2020).

To talk about a photo is to explore the meaning of the corporeality that surrounds everyday practices – as per Harper (2002), analyzing an image brings forth richness in the articulation of feelings and events, combining common language with an understanding of the situations explored. In this way, the knowledge constructed privileges experience and emotionality (Yañ;ez-Urbina *et al.*, 2018). The screenshot 20 shared by Mateo of a *WhatsApp* conversation he had with his son (see Figure 1) illustrates how the relationship between the two could be, but if we were to focus on the words alone, our interpretation would be very different from the one narrated by Mateo. The text message sent by Mateo's son reads: "Hi dad, how are you. I like

Source(s): A photograph off of Mateo's personal
archive, shared with his permission

vegetables and I live here. I love you dad. And it was your son Elian. Bay." Upon reading this message, we'd assume the relationship between Mateo and his son is stable and lively without any major ups and downs. However, the photo-elicited interview revealed the difficulties and emotions of long-distance fatherhood, with Mateo sharing that his son never sends him such messages. Geographical distance and technological intermediation are part of Mateo's fatherhood experience – encompassing other complex traits and significant risks – and these dimensions advance new meanings attached to the role of a father in today's globalized world. In analyzing photographs that contain words, the participation of the subject is paramount to understand the subjectivity behind them. As per Dam (2022), photo elicitation allows us to reflect on the relationships that are invisible in the image or – as in Mateo's case – hidden behind words:

> When I call, he is always at the table. He never really pays attention to me. Because he is so hooked, and now with the pandemic, even more so. I try to find ways to have conversations and time with him, but he's such a bastard. He and I used to play basketball virtually on Facebook, but he doesn't want to anymore. I let him; whatever comes out, I don't want to push. He and I live a complex situation, he there, I here. It's enough to add fuel to the fire; it's happiness for me that he's super aware that I'm his father (Interview with Mateo; December 2020).

The intrusiveness of electronic handheld mobile devices in the photo elicited encounter

Reflecting on a lived experience can trigger distress and uncertainty in research participants – which in turn can affect the potential outcomes of the research – and due to this discomfort, they may show resistance to photograph essential elements of their live-course trajectories (Zavala *et al.*, 2020). However, Mateo was eager to share with the researcher on his *smartphone* during the photo elicited interview photographs that weren't selected or sent beforehand to be analyzed. It's worth noting that the analysis of a photograph not only awakened memories but also made Mateo remember other photographs taken and saved on his mobile phone, namely more intimate photographs of family and friends that he keeps at a distance from the research. But at the same time, the use of mobile devices allowed him to quickly access his photographic archive:

I'm going to show you my brothers. Look at this photo. It's in Caracas, when we lived in Caracas. The little one, you see . . . I'm the big one. And this is the video I showed you, which shows my nephew, who drives me crazy. Because he's little, what my son doesn't give me, this one gives me (Interview with Mateo; December 2020).

The images selected by Mateo evoked new themes of analysis and brought forward readings that stretched through time and territorial boundaries, the context of which was far from being represented by their visible aspects alone. Mateo's case is indelibly defined by his ability to thoroughly analyze the events that have defined his identity and place in the world. In turn, photo elicitation allowed the researcher to delve into his photographs and to raise Mateo's awareness regarding the difficulties involved in being a migrant, the consequences of the lack of a support network or the emotional strain resulting from being geographically distant from his next of kin.

Conclusions

Mateo's case highlights the potential of photo elicitation when used alongside mobile devices and social media platforms. Materials here seen as "vehicle tools" that made it possible to build a constant follow-up relationship between the researcher and the researched, which empowered the latter throughout the fieldwork in shaping the themes of analysis and the paths along which the material and information arrived. Moreover, the active role achieved by research participants with the use of this technique allows them to break away' from traditional ways of designing and constructing top-down research. Mateo's case showcases the potential of photo elicitation in promoting the co-creation of knowledge when combined with digital technologies and mobile devices, thus allowing the research to take on a unique form, which empowers participants to transform the results and even their views and experiences as individuals. In line with previous research, this is only possible at the subjective level of action by bringing into dialog the emotions underlying social phenomena.

Through the theoretical reflection and analysis of this case study, we argue that mobilizing photography and photo elicitation allows the stimulation of emotions and opens space for a deeper conversation between researcher and researched. In turn, using digital technologies to share images provides new research opportunities, brings fluidity to the research process while empowering participants and blurring the boundaries between roles (researcher and researched) as it gives ground for participants to take the lead in some moments of the research process. The use of digital technologies creates an informal and spontaneous spirit where research collaboration can be implemented effectively as the contact and dialog between researcher and researched continues beyond the co-presence moments of fieldwork: there is an open channel of technology-mediated communication that can be used by both parties at any moment, which contributes to more horizontal research relations and promotes a sense of closeness. Such possibilities stimulate unforeseen moments of contact and information sharing, and articulating both – photo elicitation and digital technologies – not only improves the bond between researcher and researched in ethnographic fieldwork but also allows for a richer analysis of the results. By enrolling in a process where both researcher and researched are co-creators and find ample space to express their emotions and experiences, the former can collect more detailed information to operate an accurate analysis of the latter's social reality. However, co-presence interaction doesn't lose its importance in qualitative research processes as ethnography is developing as a methodology both in *offline* and *online* contexts of our social reality – as Sade-Beck (2004) states, online communication facilitates the expression of emotions in certain contexts, transforming writing into speech. As such, discourses with a different level of intimacy shared both *offline* and *online* were considered and analyzed for a complex understanding of the participants' social reality. Here we discussed how Mateo started to use social media

platforms to communicate and share memories – vital in building biographical trajectories and identities – during the fieldwork of the research and how the use of photo elicitation permits contrasting different time frames diachronically and synchronically. Since the first steps of social science, we know how analyzing the relations between times and spaces is crucial for knowledge production. Having exposed these arguments, we advocate for the use of photography, photo elicitation, digital technologies and mobile devices in social research as a way of advancing the production of scientific knowledge that intensely involves research participants and thus contributes to their own empowerment as agents and individuals.

The experience of leaving prison and facing outdoor society is full of social and emotional contradictions, but also expectations associated with certain social roles – as the ones encompassed by fatherhood – which were explored during the research project through the use of photo elicitation in combination with digital devices and social media platforms. As a migrant, the transition from prison to the outside world is much more complicated and insecure for Mateo: his social networks and bonds were weak, and digital technologies were a channel to "get back" to reality and rebuild his own identity and expectations. Sharing images online with his family was central to these identity dynamics and the discourses around them were key to deepen the comprehension of his social experience.

In a digital world where images are all over the place and are central to peoples' lives, researchers need to be prepared to use these tools. We hope that this article will modestly contribute to take a step in that direction.

Notes

1. Insertion residences or residential integration centers are public administration houses for the inclusion of people in situations of social exclusion in the community where people live for an average of one and a half years with the support of social education professionals while planning for an autonomous life – searching, among other things, for work and housing.

2. The informed consent protocol document of the research project specified the participant's freedom to abandon it when it negatively impacted her/his emotional well-being and its insertion process, and it informed her/him that the confidentiality and anonymity of the photographic materials and narratives would be guaranteed by the researcher.

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