

Chapter 7

Analyzing Qualitative Data: Visualizing Lived Experiences through Poems and Photography

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ABSTRACT

Use of photography and poetry offer a way for participants to express lived experiences through a visual and written means of self-expression. These forms of data collection can provide a rich, thick description of those often overlying on the peripherals of society. Traditional means of qualitative research such as interview and observation can at times create a barrier between the researcher and the participants because of the face-to-face interaction. Participants may be uncomfortable expressing authentic feeling during a formal interview process. By offering participants the opportunity to personally select descriptive photographs and articulate expression in their own voice through poetry, an authentic expression occurs.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the role of undergraduate photographs and poems in qualitative research to describe and explain social issues in an urban setting. Through use of actual student work, undergraduate student perspectives on critical social issues are presented. The presentation of the data is shown through student photographs and poems. Having an understanding of the visual means of data collection adds to the richness of the lived experiences of the participants. Use of photographs and poems provides a means for participants to express their interpretation of complex social issues in a visual and written format.

Qualitative researchers need to be aware of the visual aspects of data collection and creative use of poetry to allow participants to freely document life in an urban setting and describe formation of self-identity. These methods allow for a more personalized approach to documenting issues related to poverty, violence, and self-understanding. It is through analysis of the photographs and poems a greater understanding of social issues in an urban setting can allow qualitative researchers to gain a broader sense of concerns and ways individuals rise above environmental challenges to reach personal success.

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This case study involved six undergraduate students from a small, private, urban university in Chicago, Illinois. The participants were instructed to use photography as a vehicle for self-expression on identity and the way they viewed their world and their communities. Participants also created poems to enhance an understanding of the way they view live in an urban setting. This chapter includes example poems, photographs, and detailed description of the social challenge faced in their individual communities and society as a whole.

The exploratory questions that guided the study are:

1. What elements constitute undergraduate student perspectives on social issues in their communities and society?
2. How can photography and poetry be used to illustrate the social issues in their communities and society?
3. What beliefs do these undergraduate students hold which support or negate this perspective?

Findings from this case study will assist qualitative researchers in learning more about using visual data and poetry as a means to present qualitative data. It is through the participants own perception that critical social issues in urban communities can be portrayed through the eyes of outlying, marginalized populations. Through representation of findings in a visual format serious social challenges in urban settings can be called into questions and recommendations for future change can be proposed.

USE OF POETRY AND PHOTOGRAPHY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The use of photography as a means for presenting data is not new to the field of qualitative research. In fact, “The use of visual research methods has become increasingly widespread throughout the social sciences,” Knoblauch, Baer, Laurier, Petschke, Schnettler, p. 1, 2008). Jenkins, Woodward, and Winter (2008) add, “What distinguishes photo elicitation in academia from similar uses of photographs in other areas of media production such as photo journalism is undoubtedly its methodological rigor and, usually, its aim of theorizing from the data,” (p.1). While many studies focus one visual means for presenting data, use of poetry and photography provide a more robust means for participants to express views on topics that an interview alone cannot capture. At times, participants may feel uncomfortable expressing their views in a face-to-face interview. Use of poetry and photography provides a way for participants to express their opinions and capture a social phenomenon within their boundaries, allowing their creative expression to serve as the written and visual narrative.

Photography provides a visual representation of the written text. While use of photos can offer a visual image to the reader, the addition of poetry combines both the written and the visual offer a rich view of the issue being presented by the participants.

“Phenomenologically speaking, photography is a visual system of representation, by way of which the visibility of an object not being present is produced. Thus, we may state a relation of similarity between the photography, that is the representing part on the one hand, and the depicted object, that is the represented part on the other hand,”(Christmann, p. 2, 2008). Poetry and photography are a powerful means of presenting a phenomenon in everyday culture as the participants capture images seen at a specific time, in a specific natural setting.

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