

Chapter 6

Data Speaks: Use of Poems and Photography in Qualitative Research

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research methods provide the researcher with opportunity to share the lived experiences of participants in an authentic manner. These narratives can be enhanced through visual expression, such as use of photos, which provide another way to exercise self-expression. Found poetry has a rich history in participant-based studies, while self-studies utilize poems as an opportunity to address more philosophical or poststructuralist opportunities. These forms of data collection can provide a rich, thick description of those often overlying on the peripherals of society. By offering participants the opportunity to personally select descriptive photographs and articulate expression in their own voice through poetry, the lived experiences can authentically be displayed.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the role of photographs and poems in qualitative research. 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

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of complex social issues in a visual and written format. Students also shared their lived experiences through a live classroom presentation.

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 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 occur allowing qualitative researchers to gain a broader sense of social issues and ways individuals rise above environmental challenges to reach personal success.

This case study involved six undergraduate students from a small, private, urban university in Chicago, IL. 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 life in an urban setting. This chapter includes example poems, photographs, and detailed description of the social challenge faced in their individual communities.

The exploratory questions that guided the study are:

1. What elements constitute undergraduate student perspectives on social issues in their communities?
2. How can photography and poetry be used to illustrate the social issues in their communities?
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.

CASE DESCRIPTION

The Organization

The organization selected for this case study was a four-year college in Chicago, IL. The university is a private, not-for-profit and non-denominational institution of

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