

An Example of Using a Photo Essay in an Undergraduate Course on Methods of Social Research

I used the photo essay “On the Outside” in my undergraduate sociology courses on Methods of Social Research at the University of Saskatchewan as part of an in-class exercise on qualitative research methods.

I began the class with a brief overview of the qualitative research methods of interviewing and focus groups. Then I explained that the class was going to participate in a focus group exercise and that the data generated during the exercise would be used in subsequent classes to illustrate some techniques involved in qualitative analysis. The theme of the focus group was “The Diversification of Canadian Society.” I explained that I am a researcher who is interested in ethno-religious diversity, gender and the social processes of diversification. I outlined all of the steps of the in-class exercise using power point before we began.

The photo essay “On the Outside” was used as a photo elicitation technique to begin the focus group discussions. The pictures were presented in a power point format, one photo at a time with the intention of eliciting a reaction from the viewers. The slides were advanced slowly, giving the students ample time to look at each photo in silence. Then a slide with the following three questions was shown:

1. Does the woman in the photos remind you of anyone? If so, who?
2. What questions would you like to ask this woman?
3. What feelings did the images create in you?

The students were invited to write their answers to these questions. After about five minutes of silent writing, the students got into small groups of four to six people. One person from each group was asked to volunteer to take notes of the discussion. The students shared their writing with others in the group – groups spent the first few minutes reading silently. While the students were reading, a power point slide with all of the photo essay photos was presented on the screen so that the students would have the pictures to refer to during their discussion. Then the students were invited to discuss similarities and differences in their responses to the photo essay. After about five to ten minutes of discussion, another set of questions was presented via power point:

1. Reflect on a time in your life when you felt like an outsider. What were some of the obstacles that you faced? What sources of strength enabled you to rise to those challenges? Were other people there to assist or did you face the challenges mostly on your own?
2. What do you think are things that can be done to facilitate social interaction between newcomers and native-born citizens in Canada? What are the different groups and organizations that can become involved in this kind of facilitation?

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The focus group participants were invited to discuss these questions for another five to ten minutes. The notes from the focus group discussions were to be posted to the Blackboard Discussion Forum following the class.

In preparation for the next class, I cut and pasted all of the data generated from the focus group discussions into one document and posted it to Blackboard. I created a file outlining my research experience with immigrant women and ethno-religious diversity and my particular research questions for this focus group exercise. Then I posted this file along with the Synopsis and Interview documents from the “On the Outside” photo essay to Blackboard.

During the class lecture, I introduced the students to some of the techniques of analyzing qualitative data through coding and writing analytical memos using a power point lecture. I used all of the files from Blackboard to show the students how to start coding the focus group data. I read the students the Synopsis and Interview documents and explained my position as a researcher. All of these documents constitute the researcher perspectives on the diversification of Canadian society. The participant in the photo essay was part of process of creating the issues/feelings depicted in the photo essay. The doorway was a key symbol for her feelings of uncertainty and isolation in Canadian society. The content of these documents (researcher perspectives, synopsis and interview) can provide the beginning for the content of analytical memos. At the end of class, the students were asked to use the documents available on Blackboard to begin to code the focus group data. They were asked to bring the results of their coding with them to the next class.

In preparation for the next class, I coded the focus group data. I created another copy of the focus group data file and started to colour code or categorize the data into themes. I also embedded analytical memos into the themes.

The third class begins with the students forming pairs and sharing the results of their coding. The pairs were asked to leave the classroom for the discussions and come back after 30 - 40 minutes. Those who did not do the coding prior to class (or who had missed the previous class) remained in the class room and I showed them the results of my own initial coding and memo writing. The students were asked to further contribute to the coding. The results of all the coding of the focus group data were posted to Blackboard at the end of class.

In subsequent classes the coded data was used to introduce sociological concepts that were used to analyze the data. One example was the use of spatial references by the focus group participants. Distance was described in two ways: there was the physical distance between the woman and the person with whom she shakes hands through the doorway; there was also the suggestion that the woman was distancing herself from others when she sits alone in the park. This led to a discussion concerning cultural differences and stereotypes and how they can divide people living in the same context.

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Another analytical memo was based on references in the focus group data to the woman's agency. The woman in the photo essay is not without power. She is able to do something about her situation, even though it is difficult. She is able to walk her own road in the midst of a new society. She is about to cross the threshold of the doorway, even though the door is large and intimidating. She takes hold of the hand that is stretched out to her. She has a role to play in her acceptance by the host society and this is shown when she takes hold of the hand that reaches out to her. She can accept the help that is offered on the path to acceptance. She can maximize the opportunities available to her in overcoming the obstacles in her path with the help of others.

Excerpts from the coded focus group data generated by students in the class using the photo essay "On the Outside" were used in the final exam for the course.