Generating Findings That Are Able to “Stand on Their Own Feet”: Exploring Innovations in Elicitation Methods

As we better understand the workings of the human mind, memory, and meaning-making (Wong, 2012), we can ask increasingly critical questions of validity in research. The complexity of these questions is compounded by meaning-making processes in understood lived experience as positioned within particular temporal, socioeconomic, and political structures and periods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). In qualitative research, these questions have bearing on the ways in which we ask of participants to share their life stories and experiences (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; Lather, 2007; Smith, 2005). In responding to these questions, our awareness of the value of integrating elicitation tools into our research efforts is deepening. Skillfully using mechanisms to facilitate deeper reflection on the taken-for-granted and previously unexplored aspects of life brings a richness and depth to data generated in interviews (Bagnioli, 2009; Liebenberg & Theron, 2015; Mitchell, De Lange, & Moletsane, 2017). However, just as individuals and their memories or understanding of life are varied and complex, so too are the ways in which we can facilitate these rich narratives. Singular approaches to critical reflection on research topics by participants ignore the ways in which creative approaches innovatively linked with the research focus can provide participants an effective “can-opener” (Collier & Collier, 1986) to thoughts, emotions, and understanding of lived reality. Accordingly, this special edition explores new and exciting mechanisms of elicitation as well as innovations in older more well-established approaches.

Collectively, these manuscripts reflect the expanded integration of sensory experience in unpacking the taken-for-granted in daily experiences, exploring tactile memory evocation (Abildgaard, 2018) and embodied understanding of experiences (de Santos & Wagner, 2018; Winther, 2018). They highlight the value of integrating multiple elicitation tools (Mahali & Swartz, 2018) and critical consideration of culture and context in selecting tools (Ebersöhn & Malan van Royen, 2018), gaining understanding from alternative perspectives (Charles, 2018; Tsui & Franzosa, 2018), working through the challenges of engagement (Wallace, Costello, & Devine, 2018), and exploring more effective means of sustaining engagement, especially over time (Miattelo et al., 2018). The authors of these manuscripts respond to these research concerns all the while demonstrating exciting approaches to elicitation that make use of music, culturally relevant symbols, technological artifacts, online apps, Facebook, discussion boards, and peer interviewing.

Winther (2018) presents the coproduction of film-integrating reflective journals to highlight the value of arts-based and performative approaches to knowledge production in educational research exploring embodied experiences. Situating her review of the approach in text, film, and music, she draws on the experience of students in developing teaching competency for a movement and dance component of the Danish national curriculum. In this collaborative project, students were asked to capture their subjective experiences for the duration of their course in journals. These textual narratives were shared consistently with Winther as a teacher/researcher. Simultaneously, a documentary filmmaker was embedded in the teaching environment to record the duration of the course. Written and film data were then brought together to identify themes reflecting student experiences. Finally, the research process and finding themes were reflected in a film (also included in this edition). Winther’s reflection on this process highlights the importance of sensory experiences in facilitating both critical elicitation and critical understanding of certain experiences, especially those that are embodied, emotional, and creative.

Abildgaard (2018) reflects on the use of technological artifacts to better understand historical sociomaterial practices, in particular “mundane” technologies and the ways in which they are used and integrated into everyday. Demonstrating the “materially oriented qualitative interview” as an elicitation approach, the author draws on her study of domestic use of the telephone between 1950 and 2000 in Denmark. Specifically, the approach involves use of archival materials (in this case telephones) as elicitation devices. As she explains, rather than privileging the visual (as in the case of photo elicitation studies), this approach “takes a material, embodied perspective” that not only guides the interview but promotes specificity in narratives through the facilitation of memory recall, where physical interaction with the device stimulates “auditory and haptic memories.”
Two manuscripts explore the use of music as an elicitation tool (Charles, 2018; de Santos & Wagner, 2018). As de Santos and Wagner (2018) point out, while visual methods are used extensively, music is seldom integrated into qualitative research processes. Drawing on their South African study with youth who engage in violent behavior at school and home, these authors present multiple approaches to integrating music into research. Examples include the use of music to generate a participant-produced drama from which participant life experiences are elicited, and the use of brief clips of music to generate drawings that are then discussed as a group, by participants. As with Winther’s (2018) description of using embodied experiences to facilitate data generation and share findings, de Santos and Wagner’s use of music, drama, and drawings eloquently highlights the value of integrating multiple research components that maximize sensory reflection on lived experience.

Conversely, Charles (2018) presents musicological discourse analysis (MDA) of musical genres as a means of examining subcultural experiences and their meaning to participants. She illustrates MDA using Grime as a musical genre situated within a particular temporal, cultural, political, technological, and social space. Rather than looking at the meaning of music for individuals, music is seen as a reflection on collective experiences of particular groups. By exploring the various technical components of music’s structure within a specific genre, we are able to gain a deeper understanding of the subculture’s experiences and positioning within larger social structures.

Thinking about elicitation techniques as a means of promoting not only participant experiences and richer narratives but also continuous participant engagement Miatello et al. (2018) review the use of smartphones and web applications in qualitative research. Situated within the broader context of understanding health-care experiences, the authors reflect on the efficacy of the myEXP suite of apps. The apps were designed as part of an experience-based co-design study aimed at improving coordination of care and transitions to adult care for youth. Accordingly, the intent of the apps was to elicit information on service experience from youth living with mental disorders and their families in Canada. The authors’ discussion highlights the value of apps in especially longitudinal studies where the intent is to capture in-the-moment reflections on regular interactions. Additionally, they note the flexibility and multiple options that apps present to researchers and participants (e.g., the ability of users to upload photos, videos, or voice recordings) that expand the choice and related sense of empowerment of participants.

Similarly, Wallace, Costello, and Devine (2018) explore the challenges of online participation in participatory netnography. Drawing on their experiences with a naturalistic enquiry of the Supporting Nutrition for Australian Childcare online community of practice, the authors reflect on the challenges they faced, in particular slow participant recruitment and apathy in engagement. They draw on this reflection to discuss the lessons learned about the elicitation strategies that netnographers can use to encourage participation in future studies. Pointing back to the work of Miatello et al. (2018), one of their central conclusions is diminished interest in web-based discussion boards in favor of social media.

Tsui and Franzosa (2018) give careful consideration to what they call “meta-elicitation” in reciprocal peer interviewing used to explore marginalized experiences. They explain how this interview technique brings to the forefront the priorities of participants, “de-emphasising the authority of the researcher.” They do this using data from their study of home care workers’ experiences of client death in the United States. They argue that by asking of participants to interview each other sequentially, situating participants as both researchers and participants, space is created for participant-led research that better incorporates individual and collective experiences and perspectives. Reflected on this process, they conclude that “elicitation techniques become innovative not only through the use of new technologies, but also through engaging new kinds of people.”

Mahali and Swartz (2018) draw on five tools to facilitate critical reflection on the experiences of South African university students and to enhance agency and emancipation of research participants in knowledge production in a postcolonial, post–Apartheid context. Of particular note is the way in which their use of participant conducted social network interviews acted as a reflective tool for participants to better understand self and personal choices within a tertiary education setting. These reflections were then augmented through interactions in a closed Facebook group. Here, challenges and supports could be more deeply explored by participants. In addition to their contributions to the data quality, the authors note the ways in which these research tools contributed to participant agency and empowerment by promoting personal awareness of self and context as well as social connection and augmenting social capital. Reflecting on the overall research process, the authors’ conclusions highlight important points of consideration especially for the decolonization of research methods and richer understanding of experiences where participants have been historically marginalized and silenced.

Finally, Ebersohn and Malan van Rooyen (2018) share the experiences from their intergenerational study of resilience in two remote South African communities. Their reflection on the use of participatory elicitation approaches highlights the importance of cultural and contextual consideration when using these methods. Specifically, they used socially and culturally relevant symbols as prompts within group interviews. For example, to identify community strengths, the image of a drum was used as a prompt, reflecting cultural practices of drumming as a call to community members to attend community problem-solving meetings. Integrating culturally relevant elicitation tools resulted in the establishment of comfortable and safe spaces within which to share stories. In this way, familiar multi-literacies could be integrated into the research process, enriching data. Also important to the structuring of their work is the integration of cultural values. For example, smaller working groups were positioned within the same space simultaneously, echoing community values of collectivism. Their larger discussion highlights the value of intentional use of elicitation methods in developing a knowledge base that, in
their words, is able “to stand on its own feet,” a point to which this exciting collection of manuscripts speaks when considering the use of qualitative elicitation methods.

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