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## Engaging Young Fathers in Research through Photo-Interviewing

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### Abstract

Although conducting interviews is the most popular research strategy in qualitative research, we question whether it is the best strategy to use with young fathers and other populations who may be less willing to share personal experiences and thoughts with an unknown researcher. The reluctance of young fathers to engage in research leads to the omission of important perspectives and inadvertently results in young fathers' being understudied and unwittingly excluded from support programming and services. In this paper, we describe our experiences of using two different research strategies with young fathers: conventional in-depth interviews (i.e., interviews that rely on words only) and photo-interviewing (i.e., using photographs as props during an interview). We found that photo-interviewing contributed to young fathers' comfort during the research process, provided them a sense of agency, and possibly enriched the quality of the data. While we do not argue that one data collection strategy is necessarily better than the other, we would like to caution researchers against using conventional interviews as a default data collection strategy with marginalized, vulnerable, or less verbal populations for whom interviewing may not be the most suitable data collection strategy and to encourage researchers to explore alternative options.

### Keywords

Photo-Interviewing; Qualitative Methods; Research Strategies; Vulnerable Populations; Young Fathers

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## Engaging Young Fathers in Research through Photo-Interviewing

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*Although conducting interviews is the most popular research strategy in qualitative research, we question whether it is the best strategy to use with young fathers and other populations who may be less willing to share personal experiences and thoughts with an unknown researcher. The reluctance of young fathers to engage in research leads to the omission of important perspectives and inadvertently results in young fathers' being understudied and unwittingly excluded from support programming and services. In this paper, we describe our experiences of using two different research strategies with young fathers: conventional in-depth interviews (i.e., interviews that rely on words only) and photo-interviewing (i.e., using photographs as props during an interview). We found that photo-interviewing contributed to young fathers' comfort during the research process, provided them a sense of agency, and possibly enriched the quality of the data. While we do not argue that one data collection strategy is necessarily better than the other, we would like to caution researchers against using conventional interviews as a default data collection strategy with marginalized, vulnerable, or less verbal populations for whom interviewing may not be the most suitable data collection strategy and to encourage researchers to explore alternative options. Keywords: Photo-Interviewing; Qualitative Methods; Research Strategies; Vulnerable Populations; Young Fathers*

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Qualitative researchers aim to explore, understand, and conceptualize the experiences and perspectives of their participants, particularly participants' own interpretations of their thoughts, feelings, and actions (Richards & Morse, 2007). Interviewing is the most popular data collection strategy for this endeavor (Liamputtong, 2010). Denzin and Lincoln (1994), for instance, claim that interviewing is "the favorite methodological tool of the qualitative researcher" (p. 353). Two underlying assumptions of the interview as a data collection strategy are that participants are reasonably comfortable with a question and answer format and with expressing themselves verbally in such a format. Yet, our experiences and those of other researchers suggest that these assumptions are not equally valid across populations.

Recently, we conducted a study with young fathers (ranging in age from 16 to 25) and were surprised when we encountered difficulties in both recruiting and interviewing them. The purpose of this paper is to describe our experiences interviewing young fathers using both conventional interviews, characterized by one-on-one, face-to-face interactions (Johnson, 2002) and photo-interviewing, characterized by using photographs as props during an interview (Hurworth, 2003). We do not argue that one data collection strategy is necessarily better than the other, but we theorize as to why photo-interviewing may make young fathers more comfortable participating in interviews. Overall, our aim in this paper is to encourage discussion of alternative data collection strategies to engage young fathers, and possibly other populations, in research.

In this paper, we describe the challenges we encountered using conventional interviews with young fathers. We then describe photo-interviewing by positioning it within the context of other popular visual research methods. Lastly, we share our observations of the possible benefits of photo-interviewing for conducting research with young fathers.

## Our Experiences Interviewing Young Fathers

Young fathers have often faced challenges that make sharing their experiences difficult and undesirable. They may come from unstable and low-income families (Devault et al., 2008), may lack the resources to financially provide for their children (Mollborn, 2007), and may experience social stigma and marginalization (Weber, 2012). These characteristics were true for the participants in our study.

Understanding this, we created an environment that we thought would make it appealing for young, vulnerable fathers to speak with us. For example, we established a close relationship with the support agency that worked with the fathers; we let the fathers choose if they wanted their outreach workers present during the interview; we obtained consent orally; we asked questions in a conversational manner rather than using a formal interview guide; and we used a casual interviewing style, allowing participants to take the lead whenever possible. Even so, we had significantly more difficulty recruiting young fathers into this study than we did recruiting young mothers from the same agency for a similar kind of study. And, although the interviews went reasonably well (i.e., rapport was developed, participants were cooperative and tried to answer questions), the experience left a sense of dissatisfaction with the interviewer. Participants often appeared to be somewhat uncomfortable or anxious, they often fidgeted and physically faced away from the interviewer during the interview, they did not make or hold eye contact in a typical fashion often focusing their eyes on what appeared to be a random spot in the room, and their answers did not have the depth hoped for by the interviewer. Quite simply, the interviews did not flow as comfortably as similar interviews with young, vulnerable moms.

Although the literature on the challenges of including men in social science research is scarce, some researchers have addressed men's unwillingness to participate in research, particularly in family research. While the private sphere (e.g., fathering) has been recognized as a domain that discourages participation in a study in general (Renzetti & Lee, 1993), men are even less likely to engage in research concerning the personal experiences of their private lives than women (Butera, 2006; Oliffe & Mroz, 2005). Butera (2006) describes her difficulties recruiting men and women for a study on friendship as follows: "female participants tended to appear without effort; however, recruiting men became tantamount to a full-time job" (p. 1267).

As Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) note, men's hesitance to participate in research studies that inquire into personal experiences may stem from a perceived threat to their masculinity since the interviewer controls the interaction. "To agree to sit for an interview, no matter how friendly and conversational, is to give up some control and to risk having one's public persona stripped away" (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001, p. 91).

Although gender differences between researcher and participant can influence the interview process (Pini, 2005; Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001), interviewing men is not necessarily easier when the researchers are men themselves. Oliffe and Mroz, two male researchers who interviewed over 100 male participants for a project, describe interviewing men as "a daunting task," particularly when it comes to "private matters" (2005, p. 257). Moreover, research suggests that men are even more hesitant to share their experiences when they assume they lack expertise in the area of study (Oliffe & Mroz, 2005).

Adolescent males are thought to be even more reluctant to talk about their experiences (Dumesnil & Dorval, 1989; Hutchinson, Marsiglio, & Cohan, 2002). Coleman and Dennison, who reviewed research on teen parenthood, warned: "[I]t is important not to underestimate the difficulty of involving young men in the research process. They may be suspicious of an unknown interviewer, or lacking in confidence in respect of their role" (1998, p. 311). Hutchinson et al. (2002) described the experience of interviewing male adolescents (age 16

and 21) as the feeling of “pulling teeth” (p. 50). Additionally, the skill to express personal feelings and ideas in longer accounts increases with age. This phenomenon was observed in interventions with adolescents, which Dumesnil and Dorval (1989) summarized as follows: “We routinely observe group leaders treating young adolescents as though they were able to do *personal talking*. We had had that expectation ourselves. Such inappropriate expectations can only limit the effectiveness of interventions designed for younger adolescents” (p. 223).

Although some of the young fathers we interviewed seemed fine with this *personal talking* during the interviews, we simply assumed, like Dumesnil and Dorval (1989), that our conventional interviewing strategy would be sufficient. When we realized that the interview approach was not as effective as hoped, we asked ourselves what we could do to make it easier for young fathers to speak with us. Since we had observed that young men seemed to be uncomfortable making eye contact when talking and tended to visually focus on random places in the room, we wondered if having something to look at that was related to the topic of the interview might increase their comfort in the interview.<sup>1</sup> Thus, an examination of the research literature on difficulties in engaging vulnerable populations, especially younger males, in research led us to consider the role visual methods could play in research with these populations.

### Visual Research Methods

Visual methods, particularly those employing photographs, have increased in popularity in social research (Liamputtong, 2007; Pain, 2012) as ways to elicit, contextualize, or collect data related to complex social problems (Knoblauch, Baer, Laurier, Petschke, & Schnettler, 2008; Reavey, 2011). Although data sources for research include film clips, media images, and comics, photos are most frequently used as a data collection strategy (e.g., photo-interview), or within a particular method (e.g., photo-elicitation, photovoice). The use of photos offers an easy and affordable way to help participants engage in research (Wang, 1999, 2006), and to explore and elicit participants’ experiences in ways that enrich the quality of data (Harper, 2002; Pink, 2009).

#### Photo-interviewing, Photo-elicitation, Fotonovela, and Photovoice

Photo-interviewing is the generic term that refers to the data collection strategy of using photographs as stimuli during a research interview (Hurworth, 2003). The three most common visual methods that use photo-interviewing are photo-elicitation, fotonovela (also: photo novella), and photovoice.

Photo-elicitation has its roots in anthropology and sociology, and uses photos to explore unknown populations, cultures, or settings (Harper, 2002). The goal is to generate rich discussion by eliciting emotions, memories, and unconscious information (Harper, 2002; Purcell, 2009). In photo-elicitation studies, researchers typically supply photographs or other pictures (comics, drawings, or other visuals, etc.) to elicit and compare participants’ reactions to the visual stimuli (Henwood, Shirani, & Finn, 2011). However, some researchers have used photographs taken by participants themselves in photo-elicitation research (e.g., Smith, Gidlow, & Steel, 2012).

Fotonovela is a form of visual storytelling that uses photographs to build a story similar to a comic book. Although the term fotonovela has also been used in public health education (e.g., Waldman et al., 2010), it mainly refers to an arts-based research method that uses images

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<sup>1</sup> In another project, we found that having parents take photos of their babies increased their engagement in a parenting intervention and we wondered if a similar approach might increase young fathers’ engagement in the interviews.

or photo-collages to help participants express and share their experiences. Pictures are either taken by participants themselves or by the researchers who photograph participants during an experience (Kirova & Emme, 2008, 2009).

Photovoice was initially coined and promoted by Wang (1999, 2006) and stems from participatory action research (PAR) and community-based research (CBR). In contrast to the other visual methods presented in this paper, photovoice is a method to explore and understand collective problems from a grassroots level. Community members, stakeholders, and researchers collaborate to identify and change social, political or health issues in a specific community (Hergenrather, Rhodes, Cowan, Bardhoshi, & Pula, 2009). By having participants share and discuss their own pictures, photovoice captures the viewpoint of participants with the goal to empower marginalized groups and raise awareness of deficits within a community (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Wang, 1999). The initiative to identify issues within the community and facilitate change is community-driven, rather than investigator-driven.

Since photovoice is a recommended method for engaging youth in research (Wang, 2006, p. 156), we initially considered using photovoice to engage our population of young fathers. But since the agency through which we recruited the young fathers advised us that male clients are less likely to participate in group activities than their female counterparts, we chose a hybrid of photovoice and photo elicitation. We asked participants to take their own pictures, but instead of group discussions, we decided to use participants' photos as props during one-on-one interviews.

In our initial study we interviewed 12 young fathers about their experiences of being a father. Once we had decided to conduct a second round of interviews, four of these fathers were no longer receiving services from the agency (three voluntarily left agency and one was incarcerated) and we had no way to contact them for a second interview. We invited the remaining eight fathers to participate and six agreed. We provided the six fathers with disposable cameras and asked them to take pictures of things, people, or places that "made them feel like a dad or think about being a dad." Five of the fathers returned the cameras to us. One father lost custody of his child before he could take any photos. The photos were developed and provided the basis for the interviews, in which participants were asked to describe what they saw in the picture, why they took the picture, and/or how they felt about the picture. Participants kept the pictures as keepsakes after the interview.

### **Possible Advantages of Photo-interviewing**

From our perspective, the use of photos during data collection may have three important advantages over conventional interviews, which rely on words alone. First, using photos has the potential to make participants more comfortable; second, it may enhance the quality of the data, and; third, it may create a sense of agency within participants. We provide literature on the use of photos in research to posit why this may be the case.

### **Making Participants More Comfortable**

First, photo-interviewing appeared to make the fathers more comfortable. Conventional interviewing is typically researcher-led (the researcher starts the interview, often following a guide with probes) and is usually set up so that interviewer and participant sit opposite of each other, face-to-face, with a certain amount of eye contact (Johnson, 2002). In contrast, photo-interviewing is participant-led. Our participants chose what pictures to take and, although they were asked to describe the picture and the meaning, no other sensitive or personal questions were asked. Further, the parallel style where the researcher and the participant sat side-by-side, with the pictures between them, seemed to make the young fathers more comfortable to engage

in a conversation. In our study, it was noticeable that fathers were more relaxed and more engaged during photo-interviewing than in the previous interviews. It seemed that, in contrast to the conventional interviews, the fathers found it more enjoyable to talk about their photographs than merely answer questions, as many took the lead during photo-interviewing and provided some unsolicited details or background information. Similarly, in a photo-elicitation study with children, Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, and Baruchel (2006) reported that using photographs as props contributed to a more casual mood and to a better rapport between researcher and participant. The researchers theorized that the use of photographs diminished power differences and acted as an icebreaker: “It allowed us to invite the children to take the lead in the interview [and] the photos created a relaxed atmosphere” (Epstein et al., 2006, p. 8).

Young male participants may prefer an indirect, side-by-side conversation style, rather than the typical, direct, face-to-face conversation style employed in interviewing. Notwithstanding large within group differences, between group sex differences in relational styles are well-documented. Relational/friendship style differences begin in early in childhood—girls spend more time in social conversation in dyads, engage in more self-disclosure, and demonstrate more connection-oriented goals than do boys, who are more likely to engage in rough-and-tumble play, in larger groups or in organized sports, and who demonstrate more agentic and status-oriented goals (see Rose & Rudolph, 2006 for a review). Relational style differences persist into adulthood. When in conversation with another person, females are more likely to use a face-to-face or direct body orientation, gaze more directly at the other, and disclose in more depth than males (Guerrero, 1997). In her seminal study of conversational style, Tannen (1990) analyzed the non-verbal behavior during conversations and observed notable differences between male and female participants. She found:

At every age, the girls and women sit closer to each other and look at each other directly. At every age, the boys and men sit at angles to each other – in one case, almost parallel – and never look directly into each other’s faces. I developed the term *anchoring gaze* to describe this visual home base. The girls and women anchor their gaze on each other’s faces, occasionally glancing away, while the boys and men anchor their gaze elsewhere in the room, occasionally glancing at each other. (p. 246)

Given these differences, we posit that conventional interviewing accommodates a female style of conversation, whereas photo-interviewing allows an *anchoring gaze* on the pictures, which is more in line with a male style.

In other words, although the young fathers did share experiences and information during the conventional interview, they seemed to be considerably more comfortable with the focus (participant-led instead of researcher-led) and the setting (side-by-side instead of face-to-face) of photo-interviewing.

### **Enhancing the Quality of Data**

Second, the use of pictures may have enhanced the quality of the data as they provided context and introduced new aspects of the fathers’ experiences with parenthood including important family members and special places, such as their homes and neighborhoods. Conventional interviews lacked these important contextual and unforeseen elements. For instance, based on their photos, fathers talked about social support they received (e.g., pictures of their grandmother or other family members), barriers they experienced (e.g., taking pictures of clothes they wanted but could not buy for their child because of their financial situation),

and visions for their future (e.g. taking pictures of landscapes or houses that they wished for their children in the future).

Photographs may convey important contextual information that enables both the participants and the researchers to situate and specify participants' experiences (Pain, 2012; Wang, 1999, 2006). The way that an image is able to frame place and time provides context to an experience that speaks to us (Harper, 2002). Furthermore, using visuals such as photographs can enhance the quality of the data by accessing "sensory representations" of participants' lives and experiences (Pink, 2009). Images elicit different sensory reactions and memories, as they "evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain's capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words" (Harper, 2002, p. 13). Although participants shared personal information with us in the conventional interview, the use of photos provided additional contextual information that was absent from the conventional interviews.

One potential limitation of photo-interviewing on the quality of the data was that the participants focused strongly on the positive aspects of fatherhood. Perhaps not surprisingly, participants were more likely to present positive facets of themselves and their experiences when discussing their photos. In contrast, the researcher-led conventional interview focused on both positive and negative aspects of fatherhood (e.g., What do you like best about being a dad? What are the challenges of being a dad?), including unfavorable actions on their part and traumatic life events, which were also important to hear and understand.

### **Creating Participant Agency**

Third, having participants take pictures of what made them think of being a dad or feel like a dad seemed to give them a sense of agency. As an "invisible" population, adolescent fathers are not often given a "voice" and hence are limited in their self-representation (Ashbourne, 2006). Teen fathers are predominately portrayed as "deadbeat dads" in the literature and media (Glikman, 2004) and have few opportunities to present their own views on their experience of being a teen father: "teen fathers are charged with negotiating the stigma associated with having a child off-time and out of wedlock; ... trying to reestablish their reputations as ... *good guys*" (Weber, 2012, p. 917). In this regard, participants seemed pleased with their pictures. For instance, one father (age 21) proudly showed his album and described his pictures to several staff members at the support agency. Another participant (age 19), whose first language was not English, commented on how he enjoyed taking pictures as a way of expressing himself. He said, "I feel good. I could show what I wanted. It was a good experience, because when I want to express [myself] and my language is not good, I feel like people are not getting my message."

To express one's own beliefs and opinions is something that many of us take for granted. Based on the belief that any individual needs to be able to express him or herself in the social world (Arendt, 1959), marginalized or disenfranchised populations such as young fathers are usually not given the chance to present themselves the way they perceive themselves (Bunting & McAuley, 2004). Thus, the opportunity for participants to take and discuss their own pictures enabled them to present their experiences in their own way and may give them a sense of agency.

### **Conclusion**

Although conventional interviewing seems to have become the default data collection strategy for qualitative research in many social and health sciences (e.g., family science, nursing), our experiences suggest that it may not be the ideal data collection strategy for all



populations. In this paper, we reflected on our experiences of using conventional interviews and photo-interviewing as data collection strategies with young fathers and concluded that, as opposed to conventional interviewing, photo-interviewing may contribute to young fathers' comfort during the research process, may enrich the quality of the data, and may provide them a sense of agency. Similar to young fathers, other populations who are less willing or able to express themselves verbally or who are marginalized/stigmatized may find it difficult to engage in one-on-one and face-to-face interviewing and may not consent to participate in conventional interviews. But how meaningful or relevant is research based on data that excludes the experiences of those who are underrepresented, hesitant, uncomfortable, or not verbal enough to participate in in-depth interviews? Too often, marginalized yet critical perspectives are absent from research. What can researchers do to enable those who have typically not participated in research be more willing to do so?

Although such issues are not new (Butera, 2006; Hutchinson et al., 2002, Renzetti & Lee, 1993), the continuing domination of conventional interviewing across studies in the health and social sciences (and particularly in family science), and the lack of systematic examination of how data collection strategies affect recruitment, participants' research experiences, and data quality is surprising. It is our hope that this paper may encourage the discussion and exploration of alternative data collection strategies to engage young fathers and other special groups in research.

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