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## ORIGINAL PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH

### Visual inquiry: a method for exploring the emotional, cognitive and experiential worlds in practice development, research and education

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#### Abstract

*Background:* Collaboratively exploring what matters to people, their understanding of concepts and their ideas for innovation can be a challenge in practice development, research and education due to potential difficulties in articulating complex issues. Visual inquiry is described as a process that involves the use of generic images to facilitate dynamic dialogue between the inquirer and participants, in order to support shared understanding and co-production of knowledge.

*Aim:* The aim was twofold – first to describe the visual inquiry method and second to explore the experiences of using it in practice development, research and education.

*Research design:* Qualitative data were generated from a group of academics (n=8) who took part in a cooperative inquiry, exploring their experience of using this visual inquiry in 15 independent studies.

*Findings:* The eight academics (inquirers) drew on their experience of using visual inquiry from 15 independent studies. Analysis of the qualitative data identified eight themes in relation to the process and outcomes of using visual inquiry: evocative participation; playfulness; holding vulnerability; welcoming authenticity; illumination; surfacing depth; unearthing possibilities; and evoking surprise and provocation.

*Conclusion:* Visual inquiry was found to be a useful method for opening up dialogue, allowing the facilitator to adopt a flexible approach and the participant to richly articulate insights into their cognitive, emotional and experiential worlds.

#### *Implications for practice:*

- Visual inquiry is a useful method for practitioners looking to open up dialogue and uncover tacit knowledge in practice development, research and education
- It is a particularly useful method for those new to facilitation, practice development and research, and encourages an improvisational approach
- Cooperative inquiry enables us to gain insight into our own practice and explore possibilities for the future

**Keywords:** Visual inquiry, cooperative inquiry, interviews, photo elicitation, imagery

## Background

Practice development is described as a continuous journey of developing and innovating in care settings and key to enabling this is listening to and using the stories and experiences of people who give and receive services (Garbett and McCormack, 2002; Dewing et al., 2014). A focus on creating new possibilities through dialogue is shared by practice development and the fields of research and academia. However, exploring what matters to people, their experiences and their understanding of complex concepts can be a challenge. Questions asked during qualitative interviews can facilitate self-expression on the part of interviewee but a number of factors may influence the types of responses given. Van House (2006, p 1464) accounts for some of these potential influences:

*'When respondents are asked to recall their actions, intentions or understandings, their memories may be incomplete or inaccurate. They may give shortened or simplified accounts of complex events or reasoning. And their reports may be influenced by their perceptions of the researchers' expectations.'*

The use of imagery during interviews is one possible way of addressing these challenges, as this technique has the potential to lessen emotional and cognitive barriers (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2017) and to deepen the relationship between the inquirer and participant (Harris and Guillemin, 2012; Padgett et al., 2013). This article will discuss the findings of a cooperative inquiry group exploration of the use of visual inquiry in their own research and practice.

Imagery can be used in practice development and other contexts, for example research or therapeutic settings, to open up dialogue using a variety of visual media. Methods that use film or video include but are not limited to: video ethnography; video elicitation; video-stimulated recall; and participatory filmmaking. The use of imagery in the form of photographs, pictures or illustrations can also take a number of forms, including but not limited to: photo elicitation; photovoice; photolanguage; and associative imagery technique.

The term 'visual inquiry' was created by a group of practitioners, including authors of this article, to reflect the particular elements of this method, which differentiate it from other approaches to the use of images to open up dialogue. It was chosen by those using this method as it forefronts the 'inquiry' aspect of this visual method; the inquirer is engaging from a place of openness and curiosity as to the emotional, cognitive and experiential worlds of participants. Visual inquiry has been used by the authors of this article for a range of intentions, including: supporting interviews; enabling understanding of values, events and experiences; facilitating relationship building and connection; and sharing of knowledge. It has been used in participatory research, practice development, experiential education, or spontaneously with students, staff, clients, residents or carers. This has taken place in a range of health and social care settings, including clinical (hospital, community, residential, forensic) and other learning and online environments.

The process of visual inquiry involves displaying a set of generic images of both symbolic and literal nature to trigger more meaningful dialogue. The images used most often by the inquiry group members have been collated by My Home Life ([tinyurl.com/MyHomeLife-visual-inquiry-tool](http://tinyurl.com/MyHomeLife-visual-inquiry-tool)). Image cards in the My Home Life pack include polar bears on ice, a maze, a child with a multicoloured umbrella and an animal in a cage. As well as being a mixture of symbolic and literal images, other features of the images are clarity (they can be seen from a distance), combinations (images featuring people, landscapes and objects) and a variety of facial expressions that may convey different emotions. The reverse side of each of the visual inquiry cards has no image but has one colour, recognising that for some people a single colour may more closely resonate with their feeling/thought/experience than an image.

In use, the images are laid out on the floor or any other hard surface. The inquirer invites participants to pick an image and poses an open 'stem' question such as, 'Select an image that sums up what involvement means to you'. Participants are then invited to choose one (or more) images that resonate

with them in response to the question. While choosing an image there may be some conversation between participants and, if more than one participant wishes to pick the same card, they are invited to share it.

It is important to note that participants are not forced to pick an image if they do not wish to do so. If a participant does not wish to pick an image or cannot identify an image in response to the stem question, they are invited to consider if there is an alternative way to share their perspective. When participants do pick an image, the inquirer asks them in turn to share (to the level with which they feel comfortable) why they chose it. Using the method may take anything from a few minutes, for example an icebreaker to help a group integrate and connect, to considerably longer – say a feedback session on teaching, a research interview or a practice development meeting.

As has been outlined above, the use of images in these contexts is not unique to visual inquiry but the specific distinguishing features of visual inquiry include:

- One set of images are used across a variety of settings and contexts, rather than using different types of images depending on the setting or client group
- It's an accessible method for those with varying levels of facilitation experience, rather than particular experience or professional backgrounds being needed to facilitate the use of images to open up dialogue
- It's an adaptable method with scope for improvisation, rather than having a prescriptive formula to be followed

The benefits of the use of images as part of an interview process have been illustrated in a wide range of studies, for instance: providing a voice to different groups of participants (Dewar, 2012; Gong et al., 2012; Schwingel et al., 2015; Karnieli-Miller et al., 2017); accessing tacit knowledge (Dewar, 2012; Hatten et al., 2013); enhancing the education process (Linz et al., 2011; Garner, 2014); enriching data analysis before, during and after interviews as well as helping participants to articulate potentially difficult concepts (Kruse, 1999; Dewar, 2012). As described above, several research studies have articulated the benefits of using images in the interview process and this has been reported across a wide range of disciplines. However, a systematic inquiry into the experience of those who have used images in research, teaching and their own studies has not been carried out.

### **Aim and objectives**

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of using visual inquiry in research, education and practice development in a range of health, social care and academic settings, as part of a cooperative inquiry group.

Following on from this aim, a key objective of this article is to describe the visual inquiry method and the different contexts in which it has been used, while also reporting on the experiences of researchers, teachers and PhD students when using this method.

### **Research design**

A group of eight academics (researchers, teachers and PhD students) from one university who had been using visual inquiry in their practice formed an inquiry group to further explore and develop their use of this method. The cooperative inquiry group members drew on their experience of the method from 15 independent studies (see Table 1). This potentially strengthens the findings of the study due to the variety of skills, participants and settings involved.

Table 1: Research/practice development studies in which inquiry group members have used visual inquiry

	<b>Title of study</b>	<b>Study type (research/education/practice development)</b>
Study 1	Exploring the undergraduate student nurse experience using emotional touchpoints and visual inquiry	Research/education
Study 2	Experiences of caring for a person with dementia (MacBride et al., 2017)	Research
Study 3	Leadership development and cultural change in acute care (Dewar and Cook, 2014)	Practice development
Study 4	Enhancing dignity through caring conversations (Dewar and MacBride, 2017)	Research
Study 5	Exploring the physical environment in a dementia unit (Douglas-Smith, 2017)	Intervention-based study Research
Study 6	A qualitative evaluation of a physical activity intervention of final year pre-registration student nurses involved in physical activity community engagement (PACE)	Research
Study 7	Exploring and developing positive experiences of values-based practice in a mental health acute ward using appreciative action research	Research
Study 8	Caring relationships during an episode of delirium on an acute older adult ward (McBride, 2017)	Research
Study 9	Evaluation of a complex intervention to enhance quality of life in care homes: My Home Life (Dewar et al., 2017)	Research
Study 10	The meaning of facilitation in promoting culture change in acute care in New South Wales	Practice development
Study 11	Developing approaches to inequalities-sensitive practice (Sharp et al., 2013)	Research
Study 12	Student nurses' attitudes and beliefs about their commitment to physical exercise and their confidence in supporting others	Research
Study 13	Enhancing the experience of inspection in care homes using appreciative inquiry (Roddy, 2018)	Research
Study 14	Enhancing compassionate relationship-centred care in an acute care setting (Dewar and Nolan, 2013)	Research
Study 15	Exploring what matters to residents, relatives and staff in moving to a new care home (Dewar et al., 2014)	Practice development

Over the course of one year (August 2015 to November 2016), a cooperative inquiry approach was used to develop the aims and methods and to explore the experiences of the eight academics using visual inquiry in research, education and practice settings. The key feature of cooperative inquiry is the value given to everyone's experience, expertise and full participation, with an emphasis on active partnership (Heron and Reason, 2006). Within cooperative inquiry there is a recognition of extended ways of knowing, which include presentational, practical and experiential as well as propositional knowledge (Heron, 1996). As the focus of this study was a reflection on our practical experiences of using a creative method, the suitability of the method resided in this appreciation of the different ways of knowing. Cooperative inquiry methodology encourages those involved to take the learning from the inquiry directly back into practice, which was an appealing feature for members of the inquiry group.

The first step in data generation was the co-creation and distribution of open-ended questions to the cooperative inquiry group, generated via an email discussion in the early stage of the study. Group members were invited to use visual inquiry cards in their responses and took up this opportunity.

Questions included:

- When have you used visual inquiry?

In using the method:

- What has surprised you?
- What have you learned along the way?
- What do you remain curious about?
- What are the benefits and impacts?
- What are the challenges?
- What examples can you share with us that illustrate responses to these questions?

Data within the cooperative inquiry were generated from personal writing, group discussions and email exchanges. The answers to the above questions were collated and fed back to the group members for further discussion and elaboration of content. The findings of this went on to inform the initial insights and emerging themes. This cooperative inquiry continued iteratively over the course of the study whereby discussion, both face-to-face and online, of the emerging themes led to in-depth analysis of the resonance and relevance of the themes to the inquiry members' experience of the practical use of images, thereby enhancing the quality and trustworthiness of the data collection process. To situate the learning from the ongoing cooperative inquiry in the context of the body of knowledge, a scoping literature review was undertaken to include other visual techniques that used photographs or picture images, namely photovoice, photolanguage, and associative imagery technique. Conducting the literature review concurrently with data generation allowed the cooperative inquiry group to be responsive to what emerged from the literature. An example of this was where the associative imagery technique did not feature in the results of the initial literature search, and was discovered through subsequent checking of the references in the original articles.

### **Ethical considerations**

The chair of the ethics committee of the University of the West of Scotland school of health, nursing and midwifery advised that ethical approval was not required for the overall cooperative inquiry group, as approval had been given for all the individually quoted visual inquiry studies on which the cooperative inquiry was based. Nonetheless, all members of the group were consulted and gave consent for their reflections on the visual inquiry approach to be shared in this article. Consent was seen as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event, and we discussed what data were being generated and how they would be used during each group meeting.

### **Data analysis**

Immersion/crystallisation techniques (Borkan, 1999) were used to analyse the data. This method of analysis makes use of 'self' in engaging both cognitive and emotional processes to explore depth of meaning to 'hear, see and feel the data' (Borkan, 1999, p 180). Three of this article's authors (BD, AMcB and ER) had used immersion/crystallisation in their participatory PhD studies; the collaborative, recursive nature of this form of analysis was found to be valuable in adding clarity and refinement to the findings (Roddy, 2018). There are seven key stages within immersion/crystallisation, set out in Table 2. Throughout these stages the reflective practices and discussions were guided by an attentiveness to naming emotional responses and intuitive understandings, alongside cognitive reasoning in engagement with the data. Members of the group found the process of immersion/crystallisation to be more circular than linear and this allowed for a responsiveness to insights that were emerging, bringing additional depth to the discussion and analysis.

Table 2. Use of immersion/crystallisation in the study

Stage	Process involved
1 Reflexively engaging with the topic, and 2 Describing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial group discussion regarding use of visual methods</li> <li>• Individual consideration of questions regarding use of images by inquiry group members, followed by group discussion on responses</li> <li>• Reflexive group discussion on experience of participation in inquiry and writing article</li> <li>• Scoping literature review on photo elicitation</li> </ul>
3 Crystallisation during data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group discussion beginning to identify patterns</li> <li>• Shared experiences of the benefits of using visual inquiry were confirmed</li> </ul>
4 Immersion and illumination of emergent insights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of the data collected led to the following emerging themes being identified: surfacing depth; surprise and provocation; playfulness; holding vulnerability; illuminating; connection; unearthing possibilities; personal/authentic; pause for reflection.</li> </ul>
5 Explication and creative synthesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-examination of above themes and synthesising into two overarching themes of participation and illumination</li> </ul>
6 Corroboration/legitimation and consideration of alternative interpretations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reconsideration of above themes, and refining ‘participation’ retitled as ‘evocative participation’</li> </ul>
7 Representing the account/reporting	Ongoing writing of research article

### Findings and discussion

This section provides an analysis of the key themes emerging from the discussions of the cooperative inquiry group about the experiences of using the method across a range of research studies, practice development and education interventions. Two key themes that emerged related to both process and outcomes of using this method: ‘evocative participation’ and ‘illumination’. Each theme and subtheme is discussed separately but it is important to note that there is some overlap between themes.

#### *Evocative participation*

‘Evocative participation’ suggests an engagement that stretches and stimulates in new directions, and which pays heed to our various ways of knowing through honouring experiential, emotional and cognitive processes in ourselves and in others. It can be lighthearted, fun and energising, and enable people to look at questions, experiences and concepts from a different perspective – especially when used in a safe environment where risks can be taken (Sharp et al., 2018). A safe environment in this context concerns psychological safety, which has been described as ‘a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking’ (Edmondson, 1999, p 350). Evocative participation emerged as a key theme from a number of subthemes: playfulness, holding vulnerability and welcoming authenticity. Playfulness will be discussed in terms of how curiosity, creativity and spontaneity in visual inquiry can positively disrupt the usual flow of an interview or group discussion. The ways in which both inquirers and participants in a visual inquiry activity can be open to the experience of being vulnerable will be described under ‘holding vulnerability’. This will be followed with a discussion on how visual inquiry is a means by which people can access what is ‘real and true’ for them, and go on to share from this authentic place.

#### *Playfulness*

Playfulness links with the concept of playful provocation, described by Sharp et al. (2018) as a positive way of disrupting normal flow.

The group suggested the inquiry process opened ‘a new and bright way of working’ and was a ‘lighthearted exercise’, with some describing a sense of ‘playfulness’. Playfulness in this context relates



to curiosity, creativity and spontaneity (Guitard et al., 2005), while still giving due respect and attention to the potentially sensitive and emotive nature of the topics being discussed. This playfulness was felt to help release the tension that can arise from the possible intensity of an interview experience.

Visual inquiry appears to facilitate a 'humble' approach (Schein, 2013) to interviewing/group discussion, through the genuine interest and curiosity of the inquirer and the capacity for the use of images to allow the participant to take a playful approach to the answering of the question.

*'I particularly like being surprised by the responses evoked by different images and the way in which the process hands over control – to a certain extent – to the individuals involved. I also like the fact that individuals seem to enjoy the process and are interested in it' (Inquirer 8).*

This playfulness also appeared to generate a sense of energy in the visual inquiry activity, where it was described as:

*'More storytelling rather than fact based, as I feel sharing stories can potentially generate more energy than sharing facts' (Inquirer 4).*

Some of the group members spoke of the playful element in terms of the physicality of using the images, the shared dialogue and jokes when participants vied for the same image, or when they expressed how this was something new and different for them. Finding space to place the cards, while a challenge, meant they were sometimes scattered on a table top or floor area so the participants had to walk around or crouch down in order to see them. This was found to create a more relaxed atmosphere, which relates to the suggestion from Carlsen et al. (2014) that tactile stimulation can produce generative ideas. This approach appears to link with generativity, the challenging of accepted norms and opening up of new possibilities, as discussed by Bushe and Paranjpey (2015, p 331) who suggest 'practitioners may want to experiment with ways of priming participants somatically, with perhaps visual metaphors, and ways of "holding ideas in their hands"'. From the perspective of the group members, visual inquiry as an approach appears to facilitate this process.

The process of physically selecting an image was felt to have benefits. When a participant has to change their posture, for example by uncrossing their arms to choose a photograph, it can result in physiological, psychological and behavioural changes in the individual. This action potentially impacts on hormones and reduces cortisol levels (Carney et al., 2010), which may in turn lead to lower anxiety levels. Participation in visual inquiry can also change the physical dynamics between the inquirer and participant in relation to posture and position: there is less potential face-to-face encroachment on personal space using this technique as it often requires a 'side-by-side' position. This shoulder-to-shoulder communication is thought to be less invasive and has been noted to be more acceptable, particularly in men (Nelson, 2014).

Within the literature that offers descriptions on the use of imagery in research/therapy, there has tended to be a focus that forefronts a set structure to the activity, for example to the process of how participants pick the images. The findings of the cooperative inquiry suggest that while structure, such as a carefully worded stem question and turn-taking by participants when sharing their thoughts, is important to the success of the method, there is scope for flexibility within this structure. Examples of this flexibility discussed by group members include participants having conversations (or not) while picking the image, participants changing their mind and picking an alternative image, or participants picking more than one image at a time. Inquiry group members considered what might have led participants to such actions, and wondered if the informal arrangement of the images (usually on the floor) and the facilitators' framing of the activity as one where it's not possible 'to get it wrong' may have been contributors. This style of facilitation was interpreted by the group members as being playful and improvisational, and was discussed by the group as being an area worthy of future exploration.

### *Holding vulnerability*

Cooperative inquiry group members shared how visual inquiry fostered a sense of vulnerability. Brown (2012, p 34) described vulnerability as ‘uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure’ and highlighted the necessary place for vulnerability in creating connection, and cultivating courage and compassion. Vulnerability presented in the inquiry group in two ways: the vulnerability of the person facilitating the visual inquiry exercise and the vulnerability of those involved as participants. One group member recalled using a visual inquiry activity at the beginning of a meeting as a ‘way in’ to being open about a certain anxiety that the work she was presenting might not meet the expectations of those in attendance. This led to others at the meeting sharing how they felt about the work, and how they would like her to feel by the end of the meeting.

*‘Without the image cards I’m not sure if I would have been able to share how I was feeling... it felt like they made it more acceptable to share at this level without sounding like I was over-sharing’ (Inquirer 4).*

Group members shared feelings of uncertainty about using this method, with initial feelings of hesitancy and tentativeness. Some talked of concerns over potential scepticism from participants and colleagues, and having the courage to try it out. There was a holding of their own vulnerability in these early stages, alongside *‘being brave enough to try it and trust it’* (Inquirer 8). A number of the group members were relatively new to inquiry when they began using this method, so there was a comfort attached to using an approach that felt possible and did not rely on the expert skill of the inquirer:

*‘What I found most surprising about using this method was how accessible it was to both myself as a novice researcher and also for the participants who had never used this method before... even with limited confidence, the process unfolds itself and does not require much direction from a facilitator or researcher’ (Inquirer 3).*

One group member picked a lighthouse as an image to represent how they felt about visual inquiry:

*‘It (lighthouse) signifies safety for a method that I found simple and accessible to use both for me and the participants’ (Inquirer 3).*





As well as inquirers holding their own vulnerability there were discussions regarding the participants' fear of giving a wrong answer and how that could be managed, which also highlighted the importance of ensuring clarity in the stem question and reassuring the participants that whatever they said was valid:

*'At times people may need reassurance that there is no right answer. The question you ask is important on whether the exercise will be successful as it might be' (Inquirer 2).*

This clarity in the construction of the question was deemed important so that the interviewee would not struggle over the question's meaning, so that the question itself would not become a distraction. A clear and concise stem question would allow the interviewee to focus on their response.

When presenting an account of the use of visual inquiry, the group members felt it important to extend beyond a cognitive representation of using this method and to practice the theme of vulnerability. This enabled the group members to offer an insight into the emotional experience of using visual inquiry, leading to the sharing of the feelings of uncertainty, particularly when starting out with this method.

#### *Welcoming authenticity*

One cooperative inquiry group member also expressed how, while taking part in a data-generation activity during her PhD, the physical act of holding an image card helped her to share more openly:

*'In some way the card acts as a buffer, so that in a group of new people it allows a holding of space and of story so that there was the possibility to share with depth without feeling exposed' (Inquirer 4).*

This buffer effect is similar to the description by Vacheret (2004) of the photo as an intermediary, where both the speaker and those listening feel honoured, due to the significant amount of attentiveness given to the speaker and the fact that the photo acts as a 'third party'. Vacheret suggests the question and the image provide stability to the process, and the image provides support to the participant in terms of how it can affirm their own thinking.

As the method is simple, relatively quick and accessible to use, it is viewed as supportive to both the inquirer and the participant. It may enable the focus to stay on the desired topic while sustaining the human connection. The findings of the group discussion are in line with the literature in terms of how the use of imagery can prompt hidden emotional responses (Collier, 1957), provide richness in discussion (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2017) and support depth when participants share their recollection of experience (Harper, 2002). All of this may enable a participant to engage more of themselves to a greater extent than when verbal interview techniques are used (Collier, 1957; Karnieli-Miller et al., 2017).

*'I was surprised at the volume of data/information that can come from people selecting an image and explaining their choice. Additionally, I found it surprising how open people were about their emotional or personal experience. I am unsure if a simple conversation or interview would elicit the same response' (Inquirer 3).*

It would appear from the data that emerged during the cooperative inquiry group discussions that visual inquiry can facilitate authentic, genuine responses and is one means to address the power relationship between researcher and participant. This is integral to qualitative research methods, although it can prove challenging to achieve (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). The use of visual inquiry, as with other methods that endeavour to address power imbalances, is in keeping with theory from relational constructionism and feminist research in terms of questioning and potentially disrupting established norms of where power is held (Pink, 2007; Hosking and Pluut, 2010). The group highlighted

the ability of visual inquiry to enable authentic responses from participants, through providing a space where individuals feel safe to share their personal experiences and feelings:

*'I have been surprised at how articulate participants can be; when using visual inquiry they say much more about how they feel, and the image seems to provoke a different level of articulation'* (Inquirer 1).

Group members spoke about the images appearing to give people a language with which to express their emotionality in ways that were real, nuanced and, in some cases, opened space for realisations about the personal being universal with regard to emotions. Inquiring into an individual's personal views, expressed via images, seemed to bring about an unexpected level of authenticity whereby the participant's 'lens' could be brought into the discussion and shared to enable understanding and an acknowledgment of difference. There is opportunity for shared learning within this, as new landscapes of ideas and possibilities open up through hearing the alternative perspectives of others when they share about the image they have picked (Vacheret, 2004). This was also reflected in how participants selected images. One member of the inquiry group stated:

*'People are open to trying something different. Slightly different styles people have when picking cards – i.e., some people know what they'd like to say and pick an image that fits that, others pick the card first and use that to help them arrive at what they'd like to share'* (Inquirer 4).

The use of images appears to lessen rhetoric and facilitate individuals to describe their experience in a unique and authentic way:

*'Participants and students have the opportunity to speak freely about a subject, without the researcher/lecturer putting words into their mouths. This seems to offer the opportunity for individuals to provide a true reflection around how they feel about a subject'* (Inquirer 5).

The above quote illustrates the power of the image to enable us to access and to connect with our own 'inner images' from the world of our internal memories, emotions or sensory experiences. The visual inquiry image then becomes an enabler to the participant in finding the language to communicate their own 'inner images' to others. Sometimes connection with emotions can take people by surprise and this emphasises the importance of creating a safe environment, reflective of psychological safety as discussed earlier under the theme of evocative participation. One way of achieving this may be through development of agreed ways of working (Dewar et al., 2017), where discussion takes place about what would help participants when strong emotions are expressed.

### ***Illumination***

The theme of illumination comprised the subthemes of surfacing depth, unearthing possibilities and evoking surprise/provocation. This relates to what one cooperative inquiry group member described as 'shedding light' on participants' lived reality and experiences. This can be beneficial to the participant and the inquirer as it may encourage a deeper understanding and appreciation of our own experience and that of others. A new metaphor is offered in relation to this aspect of sharing personal experiences when using images in research/process – that of the 'soft light' and 'spotlight'. The process of using visual inquiry encourages the use of a 'soft light' in illuminating an individual's or a group's stories. The inquiry group highlighted that people are not placed under a 'spotlight' and coerced into sharing what they would not choose to reveal, rather a gentle curiosity is awoken on why an image has been selected and what meaning it holds for the individual.

### ***Surfacing depth***

Members of the group described how the process enabled what was previously unknown or possibly assumed, to come into the light of understanding:

*'It is maybe like the lamp shedding light on the forest floor where there is so much life happening. The pictures can help to illuminate areas that others might not otherwise have been able to share in' (Inquirer 4).*

Group members observed and commented on how individuals, when asked a question, would commonly take their time to pause and select an image, and wondered if this was a time in which the person could engage in moments of reflection and analysis. This element of taking a pause appears to be new within the literature and so may be a helpful point of consideration for those interested in trying out this method. The group was curious that this time and space might afford an opportunity for the person to go deeper, and to shed more light on thoughts or feelings related to an experience. This relates to what Harrison (2002, p 864) described as the 'reflexivity between image and the verbalisation which produces data for the investigator'. This reflexive awareness evoked during the process could be viewed as a form of co-analysis during data collection.

Further and crucially, there was a feeling of safety in supporting participants to bring their experiences to light with others:

*'Safety for a method I found simple and accessible to use, both for me and the participants, and also the light element for how it shone a light on the participants so clearly' (Inquirer 3).*

As previously discussed, members of the group spoke of visual inquiry as shedding light. There was also an acknowledgement that this light may be illuminating areas that had been in the shadow, and therefore of the need to proceed gently:

*'Images accessing deeper memories and the importance of taking care when using the cards because the emotional response can take participants by surprise' (Inquirer 7).*

So the group members appear to have perceived that the use of images enabled participants to travel deep, and then bring their 'findings' to the surface. Metaphor and storytelling are said to be roads into bringing tacit knowledge into awareness (Swap et al., 2001; Carpenter, 2008); the suggestion that emerged from the inquiry group discussions was that the metaphors and stories conjured up by the images appear to give rise to the surfacing and illumination of tacit knowledge.

#### *Unearthing possibilities*

The value in not knowing and being genuinely curious to seek what others may think, or may have experienced, was discussed as an additional benefit of visual inquiry. This relates to appreciative inquiry approaches (the underpinning methodology in a number of the studies listed in Table 1.) where the focus is on possibilities rather than problems (Cooperrider et al., 2008). One group member, when asked to sum up their experience of using visual inquiry, described it as:

*'Perhaps something that starts from a small seed and grows into something quite beautiful' (Inquirer 5).*

There was a sense that the 'answers' are there within us as individuals or as a group, and the method of visual inquiry can 'unearth' what is lying dormant within a person, participant or team. Hatten et al. (2013, p 23.89.3) describe this as facilitating individuals to access tacit knowledge, the sense that 'you know it when you see it'. As is illustrated in Table 1, cooperative inquiry group members individually used this method across a variety of settings where the use of images has not been reported on previously and consistently found that it held considerable value. While it might not be possible to use it with certain individuals – for example, those who are confused, or have visual impairment – it has been used successfully with individuals with cognitive impairment. An example of its successful use in people with cognitive impairments is described below: when a resident in a care home was consulted on what he would like in a new care home being built, he picked an image of ducks and shared:

*'I would want ducks at the new care home. Everyone can feed the ducks, doesn't matter who you are. It's nice to feed things, makes you feel good that they are eating up. You don't have to speak when feeding the ducks – you are sitting alongside others. It's outside. Kids may want to come up and feed the ducks'* (Research study 15).

In the group discussion about this experience assumptions were unearthed about the limits of what might emerge from visual inquiry with people with a cognitive impairment. This story illustrated the potential of using this type of method with people whose voices may be less heard because of their cognitive abilities, leading to a curiosity within the group around exploring if there were ways in which the method could be enhanced to widen its accessibility.

#### *Evoking surprise and provocation*

Selection of the images was seen as powerful in promoting provocation. Provocation can be witty, playful, challenging, questioning and encouraging (Pangrazio, 2017). Provocation can excite, intrigue, arrest thought, and interrupt flow (Heinonen and Ruotsalainen, 2013; Sharp et al., 2018). It can help us to look at things from a different vantage point and challenge assumptions:

*'It can be easy to jump to conclusions as to what a certain image might mean and then when the person shares, realise it is something quite different'* (Inquirer 4).

The provocation evoked by this surprise element of varying interpretations of images appeared to promote a deeper level of consideration and seemed to help people create possibilities for thinking in a different way. Thus differing interpretations of the same image encourages what a cooperative inquiry group member described as 'holding our assumptions lightly'. All who took part in the group highlighted how they were, at times, surprised by the possibility of the previously unseen or unconsidered emerging each time they use the set of images.

*'Even when the images feel familiar that there is still the possibility that each time they are used I might see something new in them'* (Inquirer 4).

Some group members found when using this method that participants' first experience of visual inquiry could evoke both surprise and scepticism if their previous experience of responding to a question had been purely by verbal means.

*'I've seen how people can initially be doubtful of the point of using the image cards, when this happens I think it's important that I trust the process. I've also seen how people who were initially sceptical can change their minds and ask for them (image cards) to be used'* (Inquirer 2).

This required the inquirer to champion the approach, by acknowledging it was a different way of doing things and encouraging people to 'give it a go'. Other writers have suggested that being an experienced facilitator is paramount to the success of using images (Gong et al., 2012). There was a desire within the group to offer a description of visual inquiry in sufficient detail and breadth that readers may feel it is possible to use this method in their context, regardless of previous experience.

In summary, the overall findings of the cooperative inquiry group suggest the visual inquiry approach facilitates connection with participants' own experiential knowing and also connection between the people in the group (inquirer and participants). It fosters evocative participation through discussion that stretches and stimulates participants to go in new directions, and illuminates deeper understanding and appreciation of one's own experience and others'. The approach is seen as accessible and valuable to those at all stages of the learning journey, from novice to expert facilitator. Visual inquiry adopts a stance that leans more towards improvisation rather than resolute rules in how it is enacted. This improvisational approach, and encouraging people to try it out in their own settings, has led to the

spread of this method in health, social care and academic settings across Scotland. The approach is conducive to further exploration and experimentation in a wide range of situations and is a good resource for opening up dialogue for facilitators (inquirers) of all levels.

### *Strengths and possibilities*

The quality of the cooperative inquiry was enhanced by the collective insights into use of the method and by sharing how experiences differed or resonated with others. Inquirers brought their own 'beliefs' about the validity of this method, together with the opportunity to challenge and defend why it was used. Done collectively as a group, this supported the criticality in the analysis of the data generated and aided insight into inquirers' own practice with this method.

The strength of visual inquiry lies in its generative capacity, whereby previously held assumptions are questioned and new possibilities for the future are unearthed (Bushe and Kassam, 2005). A new possibility for the use of visual methods in research/facilitation was found to lie in its ease of use by those previously inexperienced in this area. The variety of experience and 'skill' among group members highlighted the potential of the method for those new to research or dialogue facilitation.

A question that members of the group remained curious about was how widely this, or similar methods with images, are being used in the area of research, education or practice development. There was also curiosity around the potential effect that the choice of images in the pack may have on the information elicited, and how the participants' cultural, age and socio-economic contexts may influence their engagement with the images. This led group members to wonder about the future decision-making process for choice of images and how the choices might best reflect and respect the diversity of participants and the contexts within which the images may be used.

There is scope to carry out a more systematic account of participants' experiences with using the images in different contexts. It is widely written that this method may evoke a different response than if images are not used, so it may be useful to question how we understand whether the 'truest' representation of a person's thoughts, feelings and experiences emerge with or without the use of images. While no further studies are planned by the cooperative inquiry group, there is a strong commitment to ongoing reflection and learning from the process of using this method as part of the development as facilitators. A particular aspect of visual inquiry that has been forefronted in this article is the promotion of an improvisational approach, which includes facilitators encouraging participants to try out this method in their own setting. The group members have anecdotal stories of the successes reaped from this approach; however, there would be benefit in a structured evaluation of the outcomes of 'novices' using this method.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to explore the experience of using visual inquiry across a range of health and social care settings and among inquirers with varying levels of facilitation experience. This knowledge was not found in the literature. The group reflected on how visual inquiry was accessible, promoted engagement and gave a voice to those who might otherwise experience difficulty expressing their views. Relational and contextual meanings were also explored and key themes emerged from the reflections of the group: 'evocative participation' and 'illumination'. Findings suggest that using visual inquiry influenced relationships in a positive way, facilitating dialogue, meaning making and the creation of connections. This in turn can help to reduce power imbalances, moving understanding to a deeper level, encouraging trust and safety, and shedding light on experiences, both cognitively and emotionally. Moreover, visual inquiry is not simply a source of information – it is a resource that can help inquirers hold assumptions lightly, make visible the invisible and uncover authenticity. Suggestions for future research include exploration of the use of visual methods in stimulating dialogue by practice-based (rather than research or teaching) personnel, further improvisational approaches and measures that could increase facilitators' confidence in using the method in their working lives.



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