Critical analysis of a text: 4

# Text (reference details)

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| Bagnoli, A (2009) Beyond the standard interview: the use of graphic elicitation and arts-based methods, *Qualitative Research* 9, 5: 547-570 |

**1. What review question am I asking of this text?**

(e.g. What is my central question? Why select this text? Does the Critical Analysis of this text fit into my investigation with a wider focus? What is my constructive purpose in undertaking a Critical Analysis of this text?)

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| *The central question for my research is: How do young people use the internet for social networking?**But my review question is: What are the strengths and limitations of using visual techniques within interviews to facilitate the articulation of interviewees’ own interpretations of their experience?**I have formulated this review question because I am using this text to find out more about possible methods for undertaking the interviews I will be doing (rather than to gain direct research evidence for my study). This text may inform my choice of data generation methods, because it reports the trial of three different visual techniques for eliciting information in interviews. It is also useful because, as in my own study, the interviewees are predominantly young people.* |

**2. How and why are the authors making this contribution?**

a. What type of literature is this? (e.g. Theoretical, research, practice, policy? Are there links with other types of literature?)

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| *This appears to be research literature, because the author (a) reports her research data to demonstrate the uses of three different techniques for eliciting visual representations within interviews; (b) uses these data to illustrate how a research data collection method – the interview – can be enhanced through visual techniques to elicit the informant’s perspective. Although the author’s primary concern is not with the reporting of the content of her research data, she is concerned to make a contribution to the development of a research method for empirical investigation of the social world.**An argument could be made that this is practice literature, since the author is reporting methodological issues connected with the practice of doing research. However, she has been systematic both in her own experimentation and in relating the results to the wider methodological research literature. She has contributed to the development of this literature by publishing her account in an academic journal, which will have entailed scrutiny by other academics with relevant expertise. On balance, therefore, we judge this paper to be primarily research literature, rather than practice literature.* |

b. How clear is it which intellectual project the authors are undertaking? (e.g. Knowledge-for-understanding, knowledge-for-critical evaluation, knowledge-for-action, training?)

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| *It seems clear that the author’s intellectual project is knowledge-for-understanding, because the main focus of this paper is on showing how visual techniques may be incorporated into interviews. The only practice she seeks to improve in this paper is research practice: how researchers can increase the extent to which they elicit interviewees’ own perspectives on their own experience through the use of these techniques. (She is not attempting to inform improvement in any policy or practice connected with the substantive focus of the studies where she employed the elicitation techniques.)* |

c. How is the intellectual project reflected in the authors’ mode of working? (e.g. A social science or a practical orientation? Choice of methodology and methods? An interest in understanding or in improving practice?)

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| *The author adopts a social science orientation towards promoting the development of research methods by showing how visual techniques might be used within interviews. The techniques were explored in the course of investigating a substantive research topic, namely, how children construct their identities. Of course others informed by her paper might use these techniques to pursue other intellectual projects. But she suggests only how the research method might be employed, not for what purposes that research might be undertaken.* |

d. What value stance is adopted towards the practice or policy investigated? (e.g. Relatively impartial, critical, positive, unclear? What assumptions are made about the possibility of improvement? Whose practice or policy is the focus of interest?)

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| *The author is explicitly positive about the research practice of using visual techniques within interviews, though she also acknowledges some of their limitations.* |

e. How does the sort of intellectual project being undertaken affect the research questions addressed? (e.g. Investigation of what happens? What is wrong? How well a particular policy or intervention works in practice?)

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| *The author does not state any research questions, though it seems from her choice of examples that the two research projects involved also focused on understanding rather than evaluating or informing policy or practice. The second study, ‘Young Lives and Times’, appears partly to have been aimed at exploring new research methods, since it was carried out by a body connected with a ‘National Centre for Research Methods’.* |

f. How does the sort of intellectual project being undertaken affect the place of theory? (e.g. Is the investigation informed by theory? Generating theory? Atheoretical? Developing social science theory or a practical theory?)

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| *The author does not explicitly mention theory, probably because her focus in this paper is methodological.* |

g. How does the authors’ target audience affect the reporting of research? (e.g. Do the authors assume academic knowledge of methods? Criticize policy? Offer recommendations for action?)

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| *The target audience for the paper is not made explicit. But the paper was published in a special issue of the international academic journal ‘Qualitative Research’, on methodological innovation. Therefore, the audience is likely to be any academics who are interested in extending the range and quality of qualitative research methods.* |

**3. What is being claimed that is relevant to answering my review question?**

a. What are the main kinds of knowledge claim that the authors are making? (e.g. Theoretical knowledge, research knowledge, practice knowledge?)

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| *The author is developing a methodology-related form of research knowledge, and my interest is in her contribution to knowledge of research methods rather than the content of the studies from which she draws her examples.* |

b. Excluding aspects that are obviously not relevant to the review question, what is the content of each of the main claims to knowledge and of the overall argument? (e.g. What, in a sentence, is being argued? What are the three to five most significant claims that encompass much of the relevant detail? Are there key prescriptions for improving policy or practice?)

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| *The main claims to knowledge relating to my review question about research methods are that:* *Visual techniques used within interviews create favourable conditions for informants to reflect upon and express impressionistically aspects of their experience which they may not be able to articulate verbally in response to a direct interview question.* *Key strengths of employing these visual techniques as the stimulus for interview topics are that they help to (a) minimize the intrusion of the interviewer’s perspective and (b) maximize the potential for informants to reveal more than they would if just asked questions.* *These techniques also have limitations which researchers need to take into account in planning how to adopt or adapt them for different interview situations.**The overall argument related to research methods is:**Visual techniques can enhance the degree to which interviewees are facilitated in expressing their own perceptions of their experience, since the illustrative examples of techniques drawn from the author’s own research suggest that informants may make more disclosures than they would have if just asked questions. (The author indicates the conclusion of this argument in the abstract (p547): ‘applying these drawing methods in the context of an interview can open up participants’ interpretations of questions, and allow a creative way of interviewing that is responsive to participants’ own meanings and associations’. The empirical warranting for this conclusion is provided by the examples presented and discussed in the body of the paper.)* |

c. How clear are the authors’ claims and overall argument? (e.g. Stated in an abstract, introduction or conclusion? Unclear?)

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| *The author’s claims and overall argument seem clear to me. She states in the abstract which visual techniques she will review and gives the conclusion of her overall argument about their effectiveness in enabling informants to express their own perceptions of their experience. The paper has a simple structure, making it easy to follow how she provides empirical warranting for this conclusion to her overall argument. After the introduction, the author first describes and illustrates each technique in turn, then evaluates their strengths and limitations in the conclusion.* |

d. How consistent are the authors’ claims with each other? (e.g. Do all claims fit together in supporting an argument? Do any claims contradict each other?)

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| *The author’s various claims fit logically together in supporting her overall argument. Using visual techniques can help informants to express their perception of their experience, as evidenced by her illustrative examples, and as qualified by her acknowledgement of limitations of techniques in particular settings.* |

**4. How certain and generalized are the authors’ claims?**

a. With what degree of certainty do the authors make their claims? (e.g. Do they indicate tentativeness? Qualify their claims by acknowledging limitations of their evidence? Acknowledge others’ counter-evidence? Acknowledge that the situation may have changed since data collection?)

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| *Claims are made with a high degree of certainty about the implementation of each visual technique in the author’s research, and about the strengths and limitations of each visual technique in enabling informants to express their own perception of their experience – but only within the illustrations from the author’s research that she reports.* |

b. How generalized are the authors’ claims – to what range of phenomena are they claimed to apply? (e.g. The specific context from which the claims were derived? Other similar contexts? A national system? A culture? Universal? Is the degree of generalization implicit? Unspecified?)

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| *The author does not generalize much beyond the research context at hand when giving her illustrative account of each visual technique. However, she does do so in the conclusion when considering the wider applicability of these or similar techniques as means of eliciting informants’ perceptions in interviews. But she also acknowledges both strengths that suggest the visual techniques she has used are generalizable to specific research purposes (e.g. longitudinal studies, p568), and various limitations suggesting that they may not prove useful in particular situations (e.g. using timelines with informants who do not have a strong sense of time and memory of their past, p567).* |

**5. How adequate is the backing for these claims?**

a. How transparent are any sources used to back the claims? (e.g. Is there any statement of the basis for assertions? Are sources adequately specified?)

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| *The main source for backing the author’s claims about the value of this addition to interview methods lies in her own illustrative research data reported. Only a few illustrations are given, but they are given in sufficient detail for me to understand how they may work well or be subject to certain limitations. The author is transparent in indicating that she is providing illustrations, rather than reporting the full range of her research results using these techniques.* |

b. What, if any, range of sources is used to back the claims? (e.g. First-hand experience? The authors’ own practice knowledge or research? Literature about others’ practice knowledge or research? Literature about reviews of practice knowledge or research? Literature about others’ polemic? Is the range of sources adequate?)

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| *The main source of evidence is a small number of illustrations from the author’s own research. The author also cites a small range of relevant literature in the introduction, including reference to others’ research using visual techniques (e.g. Morrow 1998, on p549).* |

c. If claims are at least partly based on the authors’ own research, how robust is the evidence? (e.g. Are there methodological limitations or flaws in the methods employed? Do the methods include the cross-checking or ‘triangulation’ of accounts? What is the sample size and is it large enough to support the claims being made? Is there an adequately detailed account of data collection and analysis? Is there a summary of all data that is reported?)

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| *The evidence from the illustrations appears moderately robust, in that enough detail is given for me to gain an understanding of how the technique succeeded in enabling one or more informants to express their perception of their experience. But inevitably it is not possible to compare what has been gained through these techniques with what would have been gained from the same people using non-visual techniques. It is not clear how far the informant’s accounts were triangulated with those of others who could have provided information. In the Real Lives and Times study this might have been possible because informants who knew each other were recruited, and some may have mentioned each other in their own account of their experience. Nor is it clear how far the author is interpreting informants’ experience (e.g. when she points to the importance, for one informant, of having brothers living elsewhere, p559) – but this is a common feature of perception studies.* |

d. Are sources of backing for claims consistent with the degree of certainty and the degree of generalization? (e.g. Is there sufficient evidence to support claims made with a high degree of certainty? Is there sufficient evidence from other contexts to support claims entailing extensive generalization?)

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| *Yes, insofar as the author is in an authoritative position to report her own research data. She seems to adopt a balance between expressing high certainty about the effectiveness of her use of visual techniques in the illustrative cases she reports and being more tentative about their generalizability. She points to several limitations that her own research revealed, and acknowledges that these techniques may not work so well in all situations.* |

**6. How effectively does any theoretical orientation link with these claims?**

a. How explicit are the authors about any theoretical orientation or conceptual framework? (e.g. Is there a conceptual framework guiding the data collection? Is a conceptual framework selected after the data collection to guide analysis? Is there a largely implicit theoretical orientation?)

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| *While the paper does not engage with substantive theory, it does implicitly reflect an orientation towards social experience which is interpretivist and so amenable to qualitative research methods (i.e. people construct their experience subjectively, and so interpret the social world rather than experiencing it directly).* |

b. What assumptions does any explicit or implicit theoretical orientation make that may affect the authors’ claims? (e.g. Does a particular perspective focus attention on some aspects and under-emphasize others? If more than one perspective is used, how coherently do the different perspectives relate to each other?)

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| *The interpretivist orientation appears to be reflected in the author’s concern to capture informants’ own perspectives without the limitation of imposing the researcher’s biases, perhaps leading her to seek visual techniques that could compensate for this potential limitation of standard interviews.* |

c. What are the key concepts underpinning any explicit or implicit theoretical orientation? (e.g. Are they listed? Are they stipulatively defined? Are concepts mutually compatible? Is the use of concepts consistent? Is the use of concepts congruent with others’ use of the same concepts?)

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| *The interpretivist orientation is implicit, so not directly reflected in any theoretical concepts.* |

d. How convincing are any diagrams presenting relationships between concepts? (e.g. Is the relationship between components clear? Are links hierarchical? Causal? Sequential? Is the purpose and direction of arrows convincing?)

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| *Not applicable – there is no diagram depicting what is an entirely implicit interpretivist orientation is implicit* |

e. Do the authors justify their choice of theoretical orientation and if so, how? (e.g. Reference to empirical evidence suggesting that the theorization captures an important feature of the phenomenon? Reference to landmark texts adopting this orientation?)

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| *Not applicable – the author does not employ any explicit theoretical orientation* |

**7. To what extent does any value stance adopted affect claims?**

a. How explicit are the authors about any value stance connected with the phenomena? (e.g. A relatively impartial, critical or positive stance? Is this stance informed by a particular ideology? Is it adopted before or after data collection?)

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| *The author’s stance towards both the use of visual techniques in interviewing seems relatively impartial in that she sought to extend the range of data collected via interviews. While she is positive about their use, she does evaluate them and has acknowledged various limitations as well as strengths.* |

b. How might any explicit or implicit value stance adopted by the authors be affecting their claims? (e.g. Have they pre-judged the phenomena discussed? Are they biased? Is it legitimate for the authors to adopt their particular value stance? Have they over-emphasized some aspects of the phenomenon while under-emphasizing others?)

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| *The author aims to extend the potency of interviews to capture informants’ perspectives, which clearly affects her concern in this paper to make claims about the effectiveness of visual techniques she has trialled. However her evaluation of these techniques does acknowledge limitations as well as strengths.* |

**8. To what extent are claims supported or challenged by others’ work?**

a. Do the authors relate their claims to others’ work? (e.g. Do the authors refer to others’ published evidence, theoretical orientations or value stances to support their claims? Do they acknowledge others’ counter-evidence?)

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| *The author cites a small amount of literature in the introduction to the paper, supporting her core claim that visual techniques can enhance the capacity of interviews to gather informants’ perceptions. The citations are mostly used to demonstrate that similar techniques are already used both in various domains of practice (e.g. clinical) and in research (e.g. involving young people’s experiences).* |

b. If the authors use evidence from others’ work to support their claims, how robust is it? (e.g. As for 5(c).)

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| *The author doesn’t use evidence from others’ work directly, but she does refer to what a few other researchers appear to have learned from using visual techniques. I will need to check such citations (e.g. p 549: Morrow 1998) if I want to assess how empirically well-warranted the claims of these authors are.* |

c. Is there any evidence from others’ work (including work you know, but the authors do not mention) that challenges the authors’ claims and, if so, how robust is it? (e.g. Is there relevant research or practice literature? Check any as for 5(c).)

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| *I don’t know of any evidence from others’ work that the visual techniques discussed by the author, or a wider range of such techniques, actually don’t work. But there could be research that highlights some limitations. So I’ll need to check the author’s citations, and also search for other literature that both describes a wider range of visual techniques and offers more empirical evidence about their strengths and limitations.* |

**9. To what extent are claims consistent with my experience?**

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| *As a researcher I have conducted many interviews, but only with adult professionals and only with a focus on their work. I have never tried using visual techniques, but imagine that they could help such informants both to reflect before responding and to surface issues that they might otherwise not have thought of. I wonder whether my type of informant would resist making their own drawing, as some of the author’s informants did.**Years ago I worked as a primary school teacher. I imagine that the visual techniques the author describes would work well with young children because they were largely uninhibited about drawing, and it might be particularly valuable in situations which the informants found sensitive to talk about.* |

**10. What is my summary evaluation of the text in relation to my review question?**

a. How convincing are the authors’ claims and why?

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| *I found most of the author’s claims about her own use of visual techniques for elicitation in interviews convincing, because the illustrative examples did give empirical support. But I was only part-convinced by the claim that the techniques enabled data to be gathered from informants’ disclosures that would not have been obtained through ‘standard’ interview questions alone. The author does make this case with the example of Rebekah’s brothers in London (p560). But, for obvious reasons, there is no comparison with attempts to elicit such full disclosure through just a ‘standard’ interview. So we cannot know for sure whether the disclosures could have been elicited through sensitive interview questioning, without recourse to visual techniques.**The empirical backing the author offers is modest, since she sets out solely to offer illustrative examples of each visual technique from her own research. I am not sure how far the use of such methods can be generalized beyond the kinds of context in which she has worked. Indeed, the author acknowledges limitations of some of the techniques, even within these contexts.**So in order to inform my decision on whether to use visual techniques as part of the interview protocol in my study, I will see if additional relevant empirical evidence exists. I’ll check the author’s citations to her own work (e.g. Bagnoli 2009a) plus her citations of other authors who appear to have experience of using visual techniques (e.g. Crilly et al 2006). I will also look for other literature in this journal and in others whose focus includes qualitative research methods.* |

b. How, if at all, could the authors have provided stronger backing for their claims?

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| *Perhaps the author could have offered more empirical backing from other research literature to support the conclusion of her overall argument that visual techniques result in fuller disclosures of informants’ perceptions about their experience than would have been captured through interview questions alone. Appropriate citations of literature might have enabled her to demonstrate more convincingly that the visual techniques really are capable of eliciting more disclosures than standard interviewing on its own can achieve.* |