Instructional text for critical analysis no 4 (Bagnoli)

# Summary

In this paper, the author discusses illustrative examples of three visual techniques employed in her own research. She claims that the use of such techniques can help informants to express their own perception of their experience, including disclosure that would not have been offered if responding only to the interviewer’s questions. The first part of the exercise is to complete a Critical Analysis, using the template, to help answer a ‘research methods’ review question about the strengths and limitations of such techniques to help informants divulge their own interpretation of their experience. We have provided our own version of the completed Critical Analysis. There is also a commentary indicating how we identified the main claims and overall argument of interest to us, and how we came to our judgement about the adequacy of the empirical backing for the author’s claims. It includes our view of her degree of certainty about how well the techniques worked in her own research, and the degree of generalization to other research interview settings. The second part of the exercise is for you to write a short account of how you would draw on this paper to help you justify why you might use one or more of these particular visual techniques for an interview-based research instrument.

# Part one instructions

Imagine that you are doing a critical review of methodological literature for your dissertation. You are studying young people’s use of the internet for social networking. You are thinking of gathering data on these uses, and the reasons behind them, by interviewing a sample of young people. But you wonder how far your informants will be willing to talk about their reasons because they might feel sensitive about revealing what these reasons are. So you have searched for academic journal articles on research methods capable of helping with gathering data that informants find sensitive to disclose. You have come across this paper, and wonder if you could use it in your methodological literature review to support any decision you might make about whether to include visual techniques in your interview protocol. So you need to examine it in depth.

Read the paper and complete a Critical Analysis, using the template, and addressing the review question ‘What are the strengths and limitations of using visual techniques within interviews to facilitate the articulation of interviewees’ own interpretations of their experience?’ Remember to focus on what is relevant in the paper to answering this review question. (You are interested in the research methods being discussed, but not in the topics that the author is researching.)

## Commentary on part 1

Now compare your completed Critical Analysis with ours. Your responses may differ, as you will come to your own critical judgements in evaluating the paper.

We will focus our commentary on the backing for the author’s claims about the strengths and limitations of using visual techniques in interviews for the elicitation of informant’s perspectives on their experience. Therefore we will give our reasons for making the responses we gave for:

* Critical Analysis Question 2, only sub-section a (focusing on the type of literature produced)
* Critical Analysis Question 3, all sub-questions (focusing on the relevant claims and overall argument)
* Critical Analysis Question 4, both sub-questions (focusing on the degree of certainty and generalization of the relevant claims)
* Question 5, all sub-questions (focusing on the adequacy of the backing for the author’s claims relating to the review question)
* Question 10, only sub-question a (focusing on our overall evaluation of the paper in relation to the review question)

### Critical analysis question 2, sub-question a (focusing on the type of literature produced)

We are concerned with how the author makes her contribution to a particular type of literature (and so we do not focus here on the reasons why she wrote the paper).

a) We judged that the text represents a contribution to research literature, while we took account of the fact that the author is reporting on an aspect of her practice as an active researcher. We came to this conclusion for two main reasons.

First, the text is about research. This paper foregrounds the methodological issue of how to generate high quality interview data through visual techniques that encourage informants to think about the relevant area of their experience before responding verbally to interview questions. (The research data in this case are reported only to illustrate the application and effectiveness of the different visual elicitation methods the author has experimented with in her empirical studies.)

Second, while the author is reporting on what she has learned from her own research practice, it is through a deliberate and systematic process of experimentation which is typical of research. Her investigation is informed by the existing methodological research literature. She reports her methodological findings to inform academic researchers, who form the main audience for the journal to which the author submitted this paper for publication.

### Critical analysis question 3, sub-questions a-d (focusing on the relevant claims and overall argument)

In the paper the author makes knowledge claims in two areas: first, the strengths and limitations of using visual techniques within interviews; second, the substantive research findings in her illustrative examples. To answer our review question we could focus on claims solely in the first area.

a) We concluded that these are research knowledge claims, because the author is discussing a method for collecting qualitative research data through interviews supported by visual techniques (as we noted above in our response to Critical Analysis Question 2, sub-question a).

b) We looked for the set of claims most relevant to answering our review question, so restricted our attention to those referring to the use of visual techniques in interviewing. We interpreted the author to be making three related claims here: a claim about (a) the way these techniques enhance interviews; plus evaluatory claims about (b) the strengths of these techniques and (c) their limitations. We saw the overall argument to consist of a conclusion about the effectiveness of using visual elicitation techniques within interviews, and of warranting through the evidence of the author’s illustrative examples from her own research.

c) We found it easy to see what the main claims and overall argument were. We looked for – and found – clear indications in the abstract and the conclusion. The structure of the paper was also simple and easy to follow, and reading the introduction and account of each visual technique supported our initial ideas about the main claims and overall argument.

d) As we read through the article, we consciously monitored the way the author develops her overall argument relating to research methods. The author adopts a consistent approach to addressing the three elicitation techniques in turn, in each case making claims about what she has found from her own research. For the ‘self-portrait’ and ‘timeline’ techniques, she also points to limitations she has experienced. In the conclusion summarizes the main claims that are relevant to our review question. The additional ideas she introduces at this point about the potential of visual techniques (e.g. for longitudinal studies) flow logically from, and are evidenced by, her own research reported earlier.

### Critical analysis question 4, sub-questions a-b (focusing on the degree of certainty and generalization of the relevant claims)

a) We felt that the author is asserting the claims based on her own research with a fairly high degree of certainty, because she gives her interpretation of informants’ drawings and responses with just a few indications of tentativeness (e.g. on p558 she writes ‘seems to mean’, not ‘means’ in interpreting Carlie’s jargon). But in the conclusion of the paper, she is more circumspect in generalizing about the wider effectiveness of the techniques she has used. We noticed that the author tends to generalize conditionally (e.g. on p565, ‘a simple visual task within the context of an interview may be very helpful for elicitation purposes’) rather than assert that visual techniques definitely are generalizable (cf. ‘a simple visual task within the context of an interview *is* very helpful for elicitation purposes’).

b) While we could see that the author is generalizing beyond her own research evidence in the conclusion, we noticed that she does so with caution. We expected her to use the conclusion to promote the use of visual techniques within interviews, because in the abstract she highlights her view that visual techniques could enhance interviews by opening up informants’ perceptions. This she does, but at the same time she acknowledges several limitations of the techniques she has tried (e.g. on p566, stating that some informants were unwilling to make drawings). Overall, we interpreted the author as wishing to put across the message that visual techniques are likely to have wider applicability, and so are worthy of being taken seriously by other researchers. But she seems to be wary of implying that visual techniques will necessarily work in all circumstances, perhaps because she is aware that her evidence would not provide adequate warranting to make such a strong claim convincing.

### Question 5, sub-questions a-d (focusing on the adequacy of the backing for the author’s claims relating to the review question)

a) We felt that the author has provided clear, although limited, backing for her main claims about visual techniques within interviews through the illustrative examples in her own research. We wondered how many other clear examples she could have selected as illustrations, if she had more space for reporting the results of her experiments with these techniques. Was all, most, or only a little of her data as clear as the examples she provides? But we took her acknowledgement about the limitation of two techniques as evidence demonstrating that she is not merely selecting the best examples, without reference to the problems she has experienced with applying these techniques in her research.

b) We noted how the author makes reference to only a small amount of other literature, but we could also see that her main claims are based clearly on the warranting provided by her own research experience.

c) We drew on our background as social science researchers in considering how adequately the evidence from the author’s own research warrants her claims about visual techniques extending the potential of interviews to gather informants’ perceptions of their experience. In our judgement the author has relied on what informants said about their perceptions in the light of the drawing exercises, as the basis for her inferences about the way they construed their experience. She does not indicate having checked her interpretation with her informants to see if her view matches theirs. It is very common in studies of people’s perceptions to have no such check, though a controlled study could have achieved it. For instance, by holding identical initial interviews with two groups, and then giving one group a follow-up involving visual elicitation while the other group has a solely verbal follow-up interview. This would make it possible to see whether more new information is obtained using the visual method than the verbal one. In our judgement, the absence of triangulation (with information from others) also limits the strength of the warranting for author’s claims about being able to gain additional information about informants’ perceptions and beliefs. As nothing is reported about any checks, we judged that the warranting is moderately robust, but not more than that.

d) The illustrative examples did give us adequate warranting for the fairly high degree of certainty with which the author makes claims based her own research. For our review question, we were not interested in the content of what informants said, but we were interested in evidence that the visual techniques help informants to disclose their perception of their experience. The author provides strong evidence that most informants have both expressed their own ideas through the drawings, and are willing to talk openly about them. It did not matter, for our focus, whether informants have been fully authentic about the content of that perception. We felt that the more cautious approach to generalizing beyond the author’s research also offers adequate warranting for answering our review question. We judged that what is reported to have worked well in the author’s research is also likely to work well in other contexts that are broadly similar to those studied by the author. But the author’s acknowledgement of limitations of the visual techniques is in line with her caution in generalizing. If we wished to conduct our own research applying these techniques, we would need to consider carefully how similar our study context was to those investigated by the author, whether any limitations she has found might also apply in our context and, if so, what we might do to address these limitations.

### Question 10, sub-question a (focusing on our overall evaluation of the paper in relation to the review question)

Our focus is restricted to how convincing we found the author’s claims relating to our review question. (So we are not concerned here with whether she could have provided stronger backing for these claims.)

a) In the light of our answers to sub-questions a-d for Critical Analysis Question 5, we found the author’s high-certainty claims about her own findings and her more cautious generalization beyond her own research quite convincing. But we felt that if we wanted to use any of these visual techniques within an interview for our research, we ideally needed more evidence from others who had used such techniques, to be more sure that they would work well for us. This is why we mentioned searching literature that the author cited, and then making a wider search for other literature.

# Part two instructions

Suppose, for your dissertation, you are interested in exploring how the use of the internet by teenagers (aged 13-19) for social networking links with their developing self-identity. In the light of your Critical Analysis of Bagnoli’s paper, you decide to use visual techniques within your interview instrument to help elicit informants’ perceptions. But your search for more literature, to warrant using any of the approaches reported by the author, has not revealed any additional evidence of their effectiveness or of any further limitations. You do not have sufficient warranting to feel confident in simply employing any of the techniques in your study. You decide to carry out a *pilot stud*y so that you can try out one or more visual techniques as part of your interview protocol. The results of the pilot will give you evidence of whether your research instrument is likely to promote the level of self-disclosure you are seeking, or whether the instrument might need refining to make it work effectively.

Your supervisor asks you to write a draft of 5-600 words, giving your justification for incorporating one or more of these visual techniques into an interview in your pilot research instrument. The supervisor asks you to identify the main opportunities and risks of using the techniques you plan to employ.

## Commentary

Here is our version of this draft justification, based on the content of the paper and informed by our completed Critical Analysis. Your text may differ, depending on your judgements about which methods are most appropriate to apply, and what may be the main opportunities and risks of doing so.

*Rationale for the Pilot Interview Protocol to Incorporate Visual Methods*

If my interviews are to provide maximum depth of understanding, it will be necessary to elicit informants’ own interpretation of their experience. What I hope they will report may include emotional aspects of social networking and identity formation that are sensitive or conceptually difficult for informants to articulate. Visual methods for facilitating such elicitation are presented by Bagnoli (2009). She offers illustrative examples of how self-portrait, relational map, and timeline techniques enhanced her research interviews by encouraging informants to express their own meanings and associations in response to interview questions. Bagnoli evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of these techniques in her research contexts, suggesting that they might be applicable to a wider range of situations. But she does not provide any evidence from other studies. Therefore it would be prudent to pilot the use of Bagnoli’s visual methods in my study to check whether they can be made to work effectively in my research setting.

Accordingly, I plan to conduct pilot interviews trialling the self-portrait and the relational map, to assist my teenager informants in expressing the meanings that social networking through the internet have for them. These two visual methods offer a good chance of enhancing the teenager interviews, since Bagnoli shows that they worked for her in settings that are rather similar to mine. Bagnoli used the self-portrait to explore young people’s self-identities. My study will also be examining self-identities – specifically, the role of social networking through the internet in the development of self-identities.

In Bagnoli’s study, 13-year-olds were willing to engage in a self-portrait task where they showed on paper who they were at that moment in their life, and the people and things they considered important. She does mention, however, that in a different study she encountered some resistance from one informant – an adult. This finding suggests that there is a risk of one or more informants refusing to create such a drawing. It is not possible to judge whether the resistance noted in Bagnoli’s study is a factor of age or something else. However, I will minimize the impact of this risk by indicating at the outset that the self-portrait task is optional. If any informant refuses, I will rely on asking the interview questions alone.

Bagnoli does not report any problems with the second method – drawing a relational map – that she also apparently used with teenagers. Here, interviewees draw themselves in the middle of the paper. They then show the relative importance of different people in their lives by placing them closer or more distant from themselves. My study will examine the relative importance for interviewees of the different members of the social network with whom they interact via the internet.

Bagnoli refrained from specifying any format for the relational map, to maximize the opportunity for informants to express their own visualizations of their experience. It seems likely that enabling informants to decide how to frame their response will also reduce the risk of refusal, since they will be encouraged tackle the relational map task in their own way. However, I will explain that this task is also optional and revert to the interview questions alone if any informant is unwilling to do it.

Piloting these visual techniques will provide evidence of their effectiveness as means of elicitation for my study. The results of the pilot will provide a basis for deciding whether to employ them as part of the interview protocol in the main data collection.