connects research
Design of research with social entities

Introduction to the methodology

Photo-elicitation

Photographs to activate memories, stories and interpretations



Collection of Participatory Methodologies

What is photo-elicitation?

It is a visual and dialogic methodology that uses photographs as a stimulus to provoke narratives, reflections or memories during interviews, workshops or group processes. (Collier, 1957; Harper, 2002; Lapenta, 2011).

Images act as symbolic triggers, arousing emotions, personal associations, and interpretive frameworks from which people elaborate meanings.



Photography

Visual stimulus



Story

Situated sense



Interpretation

Analysis with context

Origin

The term photo elicitation is attributed to photographer and researcher John Collier, who introduced this form of interview in 1957

Central idea

Meaning is not only found in what the photograph shows. It is constructed through the explanation of those who participate and the dialogue generated around the image (Harper, 2002).

Why Image Matters

Photographs can favor the appearance of information, feelings, and memories that are different from those that arise in a conversation based solely on words (Harper, 2002).

Decision criteria for this methodology

The choice must respond to the purpose of the process, the characteristics of those who participate and the type of narrative that is to be favored (Danker et al., 2017; Harper, 2002; Laws et al., 2018; Pyle, 2013).

Fuentes: Collier, 1957; Danker et al., 2017; Harper, 2002; Pyle, ; Laws et al. ; 2013 ;Lapenta, 2011.

What can it be used for?

It allows us to open situated conversations when direct words are not enough or when it is important to understand how people interpret an experience.

Memories

Evoke memories linked to places, objects or relationships.

Experiences

Include especially groups that are not comfortable with only oral or written formats.

Sensitive issues

Facilitate the expression of aspects that are difficult to address through direct questions.



Multiple Views

Understand how people interpret a situation, experience, position, and context.

Shared meanings

To promote reflection and the construction of meaning based on one's own experience.

Fluidity

Facilitate conversations that are more situated and linked to the experience.

Fuentes: Harper, 2002; Lapenta, 2011.

What does it contribute?

Photo-elicitation does not replace conversation: it reorients it, concretizes it and can open up forms of participation that are more tailored to those who participate.

Visual and verbal language

It facilitates the expression of complex experiences from a visual-emotional channel.

Unforeseen topics

Photography can bring to the surface issues that were not in the initial script.

Communicative diversity

It is especially useful with young people, children or groups that do not feel comfortable with only oral or written formats.

Nuanced participation

Whoever chooses or produces images can guide part of the conversation's journey.



Caution: using photographs does not guarantee participation. The level of participation depends on who decides the images, the questions, the interpretation and the use of the results.

Fuentes: Pyle, 2013; Danker et al., 2017.

Where can it be used?

Photo elicitation can be used in formal, non-formal, open, and community-based educational settings. It can be adapted to different age groups, communities, and geographical contexts, provided that the images are relevant to the purpose of the process and encourage meaningful dialogue. Six examples are presented below.

Childhood and community — Briggs, Stedman y Krasny (2014)

Children explore their school, their neighbourhood and the places they feel important.

Inclusion and autism — Danker, Strnadová y Cumming (2017)

Students with autism show, through photos, what helps or hinders them in living well in school.

Babies and health — Kyololo, Stevens y Songok (2023)

Mothers of hospitalized babies talk about pain, care and daily practices in neonatology.

Refugee families — Alsubhi et al. (2022)

Refugee parents explain changes in diet, physical activity and health after migration.

Gender diversity — Ladwig y Phuong (2026)

Trans and gender-diverse people make barriers and support visible in the workplace.

Care spaces — Ladwig y Phuong (2026)

In palliatives, the photos help to talk about rooms, routes and environments of the place.



Fuentes: Pyle, 2013; Alsubhi et al., 2022.

Where can the photographs come from?

The origin of the images modifies the degree of decision of those who participate and the type of conversation that can emerge.

Selected by the team

Images related to the question or topic are chosen. They allow common stimuli to be presented.



Produced by an external agent

The photographs are taken by a specialist in the subject. Their experience can show new approaches.

Produced by those who participate

People take their own photographs before or during the process. This introduces themes, spaces and priorities that are not foreseen by the team.

From archives

Personal, family, school, community, historical or institutional photographs can be used.

Methodological decision

The origin of the images influences the content of the conversation, the degree of decision of those who participate and the ethical conditions of the process.

There is no "best" modality in the abstract. The choice must be connected to the question, the context, the ethical care and the available resources.

Fuentes: Harper, 2002; Lapenta, 2011; Pyle, 2013.

Six cases: who took or selected the photographs?

Article	Who took/selected the photos?	Modality
Briggs, Stedman y Krasny (2014)	The participating children themselves took the photographs.	Photos taken by participants
Danker, Strnadová y Cumming (2017)	Students with autism mainly took their own photographs; some had the support of the teaching staff.	Photos of supported participants
Beuls, Petermans y Vanrie (2022)	The researcher systematically photographed the spaces of the palliative environment.	Photos taken by the researcher
Kyololo, Stevens y Songok (2023)	A professional photographer from the hospital took the images following the instructions of the research team.	Photos created expressly by a professional
Alsubhi et al. (2022)	The images were selected with the participation of an advisory group of refugee mothers and the research team.	Co-created image set
Ladwig y Phuong (2026), estudio TGD	The researcher created images from the topics obtained in previous interviews with trans and gender-diverse people.	Images created from research data

Fuentes: Danker et al., 2017; Wang y Burris, 1997; Gómez, 2024.

How can it be applied?

It can be used as a standalone technique or integrated into a broader methodological approach.

Ways to use it

- Individual interviews, semi-structured interviews or in-depth interviews
- Conversations in small groups
- Group workshops
- In-person, online, or hybrid formats

The digital format requires prior agreement on how photographs will be shared, displayed, stored, and discussed.



Fuentes: Danker et al., 2017; Laws et al., 2018; Pyle, 2013.

Five key ideas to apply it well

The methodological quality depends on the relationship between the objective, the images, the questions and the interpretation constructed with those who participate.

 1. The image is a stimulus	That it must be interpreted together with the story and the context.
 2. The slogan guides the process	So that the photographs are related to the question and to what you want to understand.
 3. The selection is not neutral	Because who chooses the images also guides the conversation.
 4. Analysing is not decorating	Why photos shouldn't be used just as illustrations.
 5. Ethics crosses everything	Including privacy, authorship, consent, and return are reviewed from the design.

Fuentes: Harper, 2002; Lapenta, 2011; Methodology Hub, s. f.

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