

GETTING THE PICTURE: PHOTO-ASSISTED CONVERSATIONS AS INTERVIEWS

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Abstract: According to the literature, there are problems inherent in interviewing people with intellectual disabilities. This paper reports on a small pilot project in which photographs were used to assist in interviews with such informants, the idea being that this might help to circumvent some of these problems. This author took pictures of some informants in daily life situations in their own homes. Other informants, living in other grouped homes, were asked to take pictures themselves. The photographs were examined collaboratively by the informant and the author in an interview-as-conversation situation. The photographs supplied a concrete point of departure for conversations, provided informants with a helpful platform for expressing points of view, supplied contextual clues helpful in understanding informants' actual language, and enhanced "serendipity" in the interview situations.

Getting the Picture: Photo-assisted Conversations as Interviews

"We must listen to the people with whom we profess to be working" Flynn said (1989: 133), and it seems easy to agree. When listening to people with intellectual disabilities is to be part of research, however, it seems that it requires patience of Edgertonian calibre and the resources for lengthy fieldwork (e.g. Bogdan, 1980). Otherwise, observations, at the least, are suggested in addition to a structured interview approach (Biklen & Moseley, 1988: 158). Though people with intellectual disabilities are reported to be both willing and able to tell about their lives and activities, many authors still report of problems inherent in interviewing

such informants (e.g. Azmi, Hatton, Emerson, & Caine, 1997; Biklen & Moseley, 1988; Carnaby, 1997; Flynn, 1986; Jahoda, Markova, & Cattermole, 1988; McVilly, 1995; Sigelman et al., 1981; Tøssebro, 1990; Tøssebro, 1992; Wyngaarden, 1981).

Reading this literature, I was somewhat disheartened by what seem to be the inherent problems in such endeavours. Looking for alternative ways, I came upon the idea of *autophotography* (Ender, 1997) and read about photography as a research method (e.g. Collier & Collier, 1986). The idea emerged to use photographs to assist in interviews. My initial ambition was to participate in developing methods useful for getting to hear stories from such

informants, about their daily life situations, and about their experiences with the services and help they receive. What I mean by “stories” here is, as Ferguson *et al* (1992) put it, “*simply one person’s, or one social group’s social construction of “what happened”*” (p5) in the situations and events we come to talk about.

A trial use of photographs as facilitators for dialogue in conversational interviews with people with intellectual disabilities became the purpose of this study. Photos were taken and used as invitations to conversations. The camera was also placed in the hands of informants, and they were asked to take photographs and show me during the conversations that were to follow. This article reports experiences from a small-scale trial at using this method. However, I can only, as Walker and Wiedel (1985) have put it, “*offer an account of it here in order to suggest possibilities rather than as an exemplary model for others to admire and to follow*” (p194). Also, as required by the ethics committee, no photos are published.

Problems in interviews – a review of some literature

Interviewing people with intellectual disabilities, it is said, can involve problems because of acquiescence, the tendency to answer ‘yes’ whenever possible. Also recency effects, the

tendency to choose the latter option when given fixed alternative answers, often add to the problems. Interviewer effects may contribute to the difficulties, and there can be problems of eliciting any answer at all. These actual, or potential, problems seem to stress the importance of how questions are phrased, where and when they are asked, and who is doing the asking. Flynn (1989) reported that while staff engaged in their daily support, corroborated the information given by her informants, the quality of answers to her questions varied. Some informants kept talking about an earlier theme and didn’t answer new questions, some gave very short answers, while others provided more information than questions called for. Therefore “[s]uch findings suggested the necessity of examining closely the response that is elicited by the interviewer as it is a useful criterion for judging the utility of a mode of questioning” (Flynn, 1989:370).

Criticising a study (by O’Donell) which concludes that multiply disabled, severely intellectually impaired residents of an institution were sensitive to, concerned with, and able to state their opinions pertaining to rights issues, Sigelman (1981) and her colleagues would have it, that the answers to “yes-no” questions are biased by acquiescence, “*the tendency to answer a question affirmatively regardless of its content*” (p114). These authors, referring to literature on response effects and systematic biases in survey research

with the general public, see no reason to suggest that people with intellectual disabilities “*should be immune from response effects found in the general population*” (p114). Such informants might in fact be more susceptible to response effects “*due to deficient cognitive, verbal, and social skills*” (p114).

Where Sigelman *et al.* suggest that acquiescence in some way is a function of the cognitive disability itself, Simons *et al.* (1989) rather point to the disabled person’s experience. These authors see acquiescence as a way people relate to their environment. It is therefore in itself of interest, a conclusion that also Matikka & Vesala (1997:76) point to. Yet, as Simons *et al.* acknowledge, the sensible implication of Sigelman’s work is not to treat the answers uncritically and to use a variety of question formats. Arguing that methodological eclecticism is a strength rather than a weakness, Simons repeats Flynn’s (1986) and Atkinson’s (1988) advice that:

(...) interviews should be as relaxed and unthreatening as possible, and questions that prove difficult for this population to answer (e.g. about time and frequency) should be avoided.(Simons *et al.*, 1989:13)

Also Rapley and Antaki (1996) point to the influence Sigelman and her colleagues’ work has had on researchers, caregivers and policymakers alike.

These authors complain that the idea “*has passed into the folklore*” (p208) that acquiescent responding is a trait-like characteristic of people with intellectual disabilities. As Simons *et al.* (1989) did, they point out that what may seem as eager-to-please, acquiescent responses, may well instead be strategies used in threatening and/or ambiguous situations. They point out that the concept of acquiescence has caused, or served to legitimise, notions that the views of people with intellectual disabilities cannot be collected in methodologically sound ways. But, as Matikka and Vesala (1997) found, while examining acquiescence in a large sample of adults with intellectual disabilities, “*acquiescence is affected more by situational or interactional factors in an interview than to individual characteristics of either respondents or interviewers*” (p80). Rapley and Antaki (1996) suggest that the heart of the matter is the language and suggest that questions about everyday activities provide more adequate answers.

Item-reversal techniques, as used by some, might well spur the feeling of being tested. This may then result in countermeasures also by informants. Informants with intellectual disabilities have most likely had experience of powerlessness in situations where others were *in the know* and they were not. In addition, neither the interview situation, nor the roles to be played there, may happen to be clear to the

informant. Among Flynn's (1986) informants, for example, there were those who thought they were being tested. Some suspected that the researcher knew the "right" answers, Tøssebro (1990) reports. They would then be very attentive to any signals from the researcher that might be helpful in figuring out what those answers were. In one instance, after what he thought to be an informative conversation with an informant, Tøssebro was surprised by the question: "*Was that the right answer?*" Evasive procedures like "properlining" (to give the answers that seem to be the proper thing to say) or "vaguening out" (not really answering that which is "non of your business") may become the tactics of some informants (Glaser, 1998). Both Tøssebro (1990) and Wyngaarden (1981) point out that informants were very careful not to say anything that could be taken as criticism of staff. So, acquiescence could be seen as "*a general tendency to avoid responses that might be interpreted as negative, resistive, or rebellious*" (Matikka & Vesala, 1997 :76)

Any and all of these things may influence the way the interview therefore is handled, and thus, interfere with the intentions of the interview. In the end, we are advised to encourage informants to use their own words (Azmi et al., 1997; Flynn, 1986; Wyngaarden, 1981), and that "*a largely informal, unstructured approach [is] likely to be the most productive*" (Simons et al., 1989:14).

And still it may be that "*[t]he first challenge in interviewing retarded persons is to elicit a response of some sort*" (Sigelman et al., 1981:116).

These problematics in interviews with people with intellectual disabilities signal worries and doubts about their competence as informants.

[L]abels are (..) used to signify competence and incompetence (..) words and usages (..) can suggest that those to whom they are applied cannot competently convey what they think or how they feel and, by implication, cannot be useful respondents. (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995:20)

The problematic is accentuated when interviewing is seen as an excavation, and the interviewer is thought of as the prospector. The *Active interview*, on the other hand, denies this view of the interview and the informants, seeing informants

(...) not so much repositories of knowledge - treasures of information awaiting excavation - as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995:20)

It seems a good idea then, to pursue a method that opens for this kind of collaboration. For, as Kvale (1996; 1) rather rhetorically puts it: *If you want to know how people understand their*

world and their life, why not talk to them?

One possible consequence of having an intellectual impairment, might be problems of expressing oneself clearly - the ability to answer questions ties in with intellectual capacity. But a failure to answer questions could actually have quite other causes. Informants may not have much to say about what the researcher is interested in (Flynn, 1986). In order to engage people with intellectual disabilities in the research activity of being a informant, some other approach than standardised interviews seems advisable. There is a need then, to find such ways in which to conduct interviews.

Photo-assisted interviews

One such way of interviewing can be learned from Collier & Collier (1986), who produced a series of pictures (*photographic essays*) describing the situation of those they wished to interview (industrial workers). Enlarged photos were presented to the informants in order "to evoke responses that would give an inside" (p101). These researchers then experienced that the pictures were taken as an invitation. Their informants led on, based on their special insight, in the investigation of what the photos had to tell.

Psychologically, the photographs on the table performed as a third party

in the interview session. We were asking questions of the photographs and the informants became our assistants in discovering the answers to these questions in the reality of the photographs. We were exploring the photographs together. (p105)

Where probe questions otherwise might create tension, the collaborative investigation of the pictures resulted in the spontaneous flow of detailed information.

Byers (1966) points out that photographs hold information, but no meaning. Meaning is the product of this information and the participation of someone looking.

In this view, the photograph is not a "message" in the usual sense. It is, instead, the raw material for an infinite number of messages which each viewer can construct for himself. (Byers, 1966:55)

The photographs in this study are therefore used as vantage points for conversations. The idea behind this project was to take heed of the need for ways of getting to hear stories from informants who have intellectual disabilities. There is here a need for methods which we as researchers can argue on behalf of, and place sufficient trust in. This trial with photo-assisted interviews was made in search of ways to circumvent the problems reported in literature.

Method and sample

Sample

Reforms for people with intellectual disability in Norway have resulted in re-integration into the community for all who once lived in the special institutions. The typical new home is an apartment of one's own that is located in close proximity of 2-5 others, in a block of flats or in row-houses. The tenants of such "grouped homes"¹ share services from a staff base that usually is adjacent, frequently in connection with some sort of common rooms accessible for all the tenants. The people recruited as informants all live in grouped homes.

The informants in this study have all from moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. Several of the informants have a style of speech and/or pronunciation that was difficult to understand, at least for those not well acquainted with them. Two used such limited vocabularies that this was additionally challenging for the interviewer.

To find, and to be introduced to informants, I first chose two areas within a municipality, and then relied on the nominations made by the area co-ordinators there. Based on this preliminary information I employed a purposive sampling strategy and chose the site where I wanted to go as photographer. The route to consent involved getting permissions at different levels of service bureaucracy and from the tenants' individual trustees

(receivers/guardians). Permissions were obtained before I approached the tenants to inform them about the research and to ask for their co-operation. Three tenants subsequently became photo subjects and informants in the first part of the study.

Based on the same preliminary information from the area co-ordinators, I contacted managers for other groups, asking that they nominate tenants who used at least some verbal language, and who were likely to learn to use the Polaroid camera. The same route to consent was again necessary. Finally, four tenants became photographers and informants in the second phase of this research.

Method

Three different combinations of pictures and interviews were carried out in this research. First, enlarged photographs that I had taken in the course of a short fieldwork period were used in conducting interviews as conversations. The conversations focused on those themes that the pictures might help us bring up. This was done with two informants, one of whom also participated in a session using the next combination of photographs and interview. This first way of using the pictures involves a time span between taking the pictures and showing the enlarged prints of them. Therefore, secondly, Polaroids were also made during the fieldwork. This allowed for interviews sooner after the incidents that were paid attention to,

and where photos therefor were taken. Two informants took part in this procedure. The three people involved in these two procedures all have apartments in the same grouped homes arrangement.

Since taking a photograph involves choosing a perspective, I hoped to experience that:

(...) through photographs by an observer together with comments about the photographs by the actor, there is a confluence of the insider and outsider views. (Ziller, 1990:19)

I also thought the images might be helpful in involving the informants in setting the agenda or focus of attention for interview content.

Finally, in the second phase of the project, I asked four tenants (from four other grouped homes arrangements) to take Polaroids with my camera. In the course of introductions I would ask the name of the place where they live. Though some additionally supplied the address of their apartment, generally tenants would use (or agree to use) the organisational name of the grouped homes arrangement. This implied that I could use the term 'grouped homes arrangement' to their understanding. Explaining that I was trying to learn about life in such arrangements, I would ask her/him to help me by taking pictures with the Polaroid camera. The pictures should be what s/he would

want to show me about living in a grouped homes arrangement. Some asked me if they could or should take pictures of named objects, people, or situations. I underscored that they should decide for themselves. The informants were instructed how to operate the camera and how to handle the developing Polaroids, and they made a few trial photos. We made an appointment for the following week, when I was to come back and look at the pictures together with the photographer, and to collect the camera.

When one looks at someone's snapshots or kinflicks, one can assume that the images represent an event or experience of some importance to the photographer, something that s/he wanted to capture and record. What event or experience that may have been is, however, neither self-evident nor necessarily easy to discover. So for photos to be useful in gathering such information, they should be answering an assignment. As Ziller (1990; 125) puts it:

A more systematic approach to observations of the view of an event from the inside, or the actor's view, is now possible by simply asking the actor to take a set of photographs during the course of a particular experience or event.

All interviews were arranged with the informant her/himself. I asked, in the presence of staff, if we could look at

the pictures together, and if I may record on tape what we were saying. When the informant agreed and invited me in, the interview was conducted “under four eyes”. (There was one exception where the informant wanted the member of staff present, clearly indicating this by telling staff where to sit.) No one objected to the tape recorder, and generally it was totally ignored during the interview.

Results

The pictures

The enlarged photos were presented to the informants as photo “essays”, pictures taken over the course of several visits were put together and shown in an arranged sequence. In Richard’s² case, the picture sequence mirrored the daily routine, though pictures of things (e.g. some furniture, a notice board, a record player, etc) were injected into the series. With Ruth there were two groups of photos; one showing her doing things herself and the other showing her and staff in situations together. The Polaroids are also slightly varied. For Ruth they were snapshots from a housework situation. For Robert, interviewed solely based on Polaroids, there were some of things, some that showed the unassisted preparing of a meal, and there was a series recording a conflict with staff as it unfolded. The photos I took, both Polaroids and the enlarged ones, were based on the idea to ‘prompt’ conversations with different

types of images - things, rooms and locations, and people doing things – thinking that this might provide me with the basis for comparisons as to what sort of images contain the right stimulus for stories.

The pictures taken by tenants themselves varied greatly. Ron took pictures to show me the apartment. Rebecca directed staff to take pictures of her while she was doing housework herself. The ones she took by herself often include other people. Ruby took most of her pictures in the common room adjacent to her own apartment; Randy took pictures of his things.

All four photographers were supplied with a film in the camera and an additional film, each for 10 Polaroids. Eight, twelve and two times fourteen photos were produced counting the trials made first. This means then that everyone had the possibility to make more pictures with the film already in the camera at the time they stopped. It is not unlikely that more photos would have resulted from a wider timeframe. Ron asked for more time, by my first return he had taken only one photo in addition to the trials initially made. “*Now I know how,*” he said, “*I’ll have more by next week.*”

Were the problems reported in the literature avoided by this approach?

The fact that the conversations were based on photographs, and that our collaborate examination of these photo-

graphs often was led on by the informant, provided a chance to avoid question formats that could result in acquiescent responses because they needed a “yes” or “no” answer. Recency effects could be avoided along the same lines, the informants could choose what to focus in the photos and fixed answer alternatives were not necessary or natural.

When I presented the Polaroids I had made to Ruth, not much came of it. Acquiescence did not seem to colour the situation. She had little to say on her own accord, and often when I asked about the pictures, she seemed to think I should already know. I speculate that this happened because only a little time had lapsed since the photos were made. We had both been there, so we should both know. Looking over the pictures taken over the course of several visits, she had more to say. Starting off, she would try to pinpoint when the photo was taken by looking for clues in the picture. Such clues could be what kind of clothes she was wearing (indicating where she was going/had been) or what she was doing (consistent with her weekly routines). The enlarged photos yielded more reflections, spurred by her thinking back to when the photo was taken. In this case response was elicited in much the same way as Collier and Collier (1986) reported.

Interviewer effects are harder to avoid. As interviewers often do, this interviewer felt

(...) challenged to provide enough structure so that the subjects know what is being asked of them, yet not so much that the subjects' answers are proscribed. (Biklen & Moseley, 1988:157)

Even though the photographs were introduced to become the catalytic “third party” in the interview, transcripts go to show that when response from a informant initially was failing, questions from this interviewer sometimes enhanced such failing rather than did they elicit answers as intended. It is not unlikely that such questioning spurred the feeling of being tested, and that this resulted in silence as a countermeasure. Repeated questions like “What is this a picture of?” or “What’s happening here?” more often stopped the informant than it prompted response. Also, I did not often experience the spontaneous flow of detailed information that Collier & Collier (1986) report from their research.

In situations where the informant’s speech was difficult to understand, pictures supplied contextual clues. Because of this, tending the situations with repetitive questions of “what?” could be avoided. Even so, while listening to tapes of conversations and doing the transcribing as verbatim as possible, I recognise mistakes. Like Moseley (Biklen & Moseley, 1988), in some cases I found it easier to understand what was said while listening to the tapes than during the actual interviews.

There were, of course, incidents where informants did not understand questions posed by the interviewer either. Sometimes this may have had to do with cognitive difficulties for the informant, the questions were asking too much. Biklen and Moseley report such an example from their research, and they propose a strategy:

Pete was not able to bring the supervisor and the counsellor together to compare them. One strategy to overcome these cognitive difficulties, then, is to ask about people, things, and activities, separately, rather than asking the respondent to provide a comparison or analysis. (Biklen & Moseley, 1988: 158)

This was the route I mostly followed, but even so, with two of the informants who participated as photographers interviews yielded little. Randy, e.g., used few worded phrases only naming that which was to be seen in a picture. Direct questioning and techniques of active listening (nods, “hm”s, repeating words, etc) did not elicit any more talk on his side. And as we progressed through the pictures to the last of them, he terminated the conversation with a distinct “*Finished*”. Whether or not Randy was confining himself to what he could see as “the right answer” is hard to tell. Naming the photographed objects might be the only message he knew how to get across to the stranger.

The feeling of being tested, and then the need for a “right” answer, are likely reduced in this method of research, though not completely eliminated it seems. The four photographers, recruited through nominations by others, were individuals of unlike ability. Staff who knew each person initially supported the view that this person probably could operate the Polaroid camera. Two to four trials were made during instruction, all four photographers getting at least one intended image in a (final) picture as a result. Still problems remained. Firstly, no one took these first pictures without at least some affirmation about his or her choice of focus. There is a danger that these affirmations, even though I was careful not to be suggestive, may have functioned as pattern for further choice of what photographs to take. Secondly, since I had but one camera, it became necessary to suggest a limited timeframe for taking photos. In some cases, this made apparent to staff a necessity to remind the photographer to in fact use the camera - a week slips quickly by. The risk involved here is that suggestions about when to take pictures may carry or lead to suggestions of what, influencing the informant intentionally or inadvertently. Thirdly, to get in the picture themselves, informants had to ask staff to take one or more photographs. One cannot be sure whether such initiatives truly came from informants, or if they are a function of the reminders.

Two informants, Ruby and Randy, had problems of a more technical nature in handling the camera. Randy was startled by the auto-flash, an automatic device which was necessary to get any clear picture from inside the apartment at the actual time of year. He still managed to take pictures, but one can wonder if better help to get acquainted with the camera initially would have opened for more active pursuit of things and places to photograph. Ruby could focus on someone or an object to photograph, but then had to have a look in order to find the button to push. Consequently she lost focus. Staff reported helping her by collaborating in the act of taking the photo; she would choose a subject or object through the focus, they would press the button for her when she replied "OK" to their "Got it?". This involvement by staff may trigger the sensation of being tested and the need to get it right.

The assignment of taking pictures and participating in conversations about them may also trigger the propensity for seeking "the right answer", or other ways of showing to be competent. Like when Ron reported about the use of his washing machine, he said, "*They helped and then I learned how*". Showing me the photo he had taken of it, he was anxious for me to understand how well he could do things himself. The importance he held in this is highlighted by the fact that this is the only picture he took elsewhere than where any guest would see. "*I keep the*

place nice as I can," he said commenting a picture of his neat and tidy apartment. This theme of *knowing how* seemed important to other tenants also. Robert didn't say so much about it directly. When he sorted the pictures at the end of the interview session, however, he grouped the ones where he was doing things on his own as "*the good ones.*"

What else does this method provide?

In some instances, the photos in hand helped focus on issues otherwise not so willingly imparted. The issue of privacy and self-determination may be an example of sensitive issues for the tenants in such arrangements. Conflicts are obviously a sensitive issue, and conflicts do sometimes arise. While visiting Robert, I chanced to get a series of photographs as a conflict between Stephanie and he unfolded. She had come to help him in the kitchen. At one stage, a minor disagreement resulted in some agitation on Richard's part. Stephanie, unwilling to stand for this behaviour, said she would leave and come back when he had calmed down. Upon return she rang the bell, but Robert was in no mood to let her back in. There is a pane of glass in Robert's front door. The photograph showing Stephanie's head outside, and him turning away inside the door, captures the conflict. Richard didn't like this picture much. He kept pointing out details of little interest ("*That's a mirror there*") and avoiding the obvious in the scene, a strategy which

can be seen as “vaguing out”. When pushed by my questions, he retorted “*Then ... well, no ... don't know anymore.*” Though he did not like being reminded by it, this Polaroid offered me an anchor to the situation. He wouldn't have told me about it otherwise it seems. The photograph brought a better chance to get at what had unfolded than mere talk (even based on an observation) would have afforded me.

Serendipity

“*Yeah, I know what that is,*” Richard said as he looked at the pictures. While pointing out details in a picture of his living room, he also mentioned things you would have to know about to notice, like “*There's Robby*”. There was picture in a frame on top of the TV to be seen in the photo that I was showing him, but images in this picture were not recognisable at all. Since Richard had brought the mention of his friend into our conversation, we talked about how they arranged visits to each other. His friend wasn't able to come over by himself; “*...epilepsy, you see*”, Richard said. Sometimes the friend could come accompanied by staff from where he lives, “*if they have the time*”. Otherwise, when Richard wanted to see his friend, he had someone like Susan or Sarah help him, he said. They would call staff at the other place to ask if his friend was at home, and if Richard could come for a visit. This is an example of how the serendipitous discoveries brought about by the photo-

graphs, or more precisely by our joint examination of them, led to information I didn't know to ask for.

The connection Richard made between the other man's epilepsy and inability to travel alone was, I have to admit, a bit more than I had expected of him. This *knowing how things are*, is a theme that Rebecca also commented. We were looking at a picture taken of her and some of the other tenants where she lived. She told me who is who, and remarked one man was missing in the picture. He sits in a special chair, Rebecca explained, “*so he won't fall*”. Then she added, “*He says 'tuttah', that means he wants coffee*”. Knowing one's neighbour might be no more than expected, but these remarks consequently helped me focus on how close these particular neighbours are to each other, and the nature of their interaction.

“*I know who she is, and you're her teacher*” Rebecca pointed out while pointing to the photo she had taken of a volunteer³ who visits her. This gave rise to a conversation about who contacted volunteers and why. Rebecca knew that social services did the recruiting, and she explained that a volunteer makes it easier for her to get out more in the evening. She also knew who of the others had visits from volunteers. Rebecca's remark also points out that she has the ability to acquire information, she had somehow found out a relationship between someone in her circles and me.

In conversations over photographs with other informants this *'having information'* shone through too. When a photo had started us talking about getting help, Richard once mentioned that a member of staff (someone not in any picture) had *"quit because of her back"*. We had a picture of someone helping Ruth with a task, the person who used to assist her before, she mentioned, had been *"on leave"* for some time. The informants may have referred to these connections in small talk, as a matter of curiosity, or this may have been a signal of the importance of having information. Such distinctions were, however, not followed up on during interviews.

The "insider's" perspective

Photographs are images that a photographer, for some reason or other, found it worth recording. This was the idea behind the invitation to my informants. Also, looking at what in fact is recorded may also alert a viewer to what is missed or to that which has fallen outside of the chosen frame. As it turned out, "my" photographers neither took pictures of other tenants, nor had pictures taken of themselves, when they were receiving help from staff, while many of the pictures I had taken have such content. This disparity may well be an indication of the difference between my *etic* perspective, one carrying the outsider's presuppositions and interests, and the *emic* point of view of the tenants (Goode, 1992). From their point of view, my focus on

help might not be valid or seem interesting, which ever the case may be.

Staff are still a part of the total arrangement. Researchers looking into these grouped homes arrangements in Norway have noted that a door to lock and a doorbell to ring are such powerful cultural signals of *Home* (as in *"..is my castle"*), that where staff may sometimes ignore this, they still *say* that they ring the bell (Sandvin, Söder, Lichtwarck, & Magnusson, 1998). But generally, the apartment is a private home, and like everywhere else guests have to be let in by the tenant. This issue of privacy came up in different ways in the photo-assisted conversations. Even when staff are expected and wanted, according to Rebecca they cannot come straight in because *"s not allowed (chuckling)." Rebecca's point was a spin-off from looking at a picture which started her telling me that staff are expected to help when it is needed. When Richard tells the story, it starts directly from a picture.*

*Richard (looking at a photo):
"That's not me, that's Sarah."*

Helge: "What's she doing in here?" (There seems to be an emphasis in my voice)

R: "Maybe she.. You can't say that! She hears it and she'll think she can't come in."

H: "Why would.... Who decides who gets to come in here then?"

R: "That's me."

The underlining of who decides is an answer to my question. What the exchange about the picture additionally brings to the fore, is Richard's worry about what Sarah might think if she heard us. So, he decides who gets to come in, he *says* this goes for staff too. He evidently knows full well, though, that they are different customers entirely. Other times even the ideals and formalities of who decides, are dropped, ringing the bell may not be the case everywhere. Ruby, who lives in a house that is more of a group home than a grouped homes arrangement, indicated this. She had taken a picture of a cat napping in her chair. When I asked whose cat it was, she replied "*He's the common room's*", while she pointed to a door kept open connecting her apartment to that location. Here, the issue of privacy (or lack of it) was indirectly accessed through the photo of "everybody's" cat.

No-one spoke overtly critically of staff, more often quite the opposite. Commenting on many pictures of her doing various tasks of housework, Ruth would report what she usually could do and what members of staff have to take care of. Like some of the others, she plainly expects that necessary help should be available to her. Gustavsson (1998) reports of the same attitude among his informants. "*I get the help I need - what's necessary*," Ruth said. That is what staff is there for. Commenting the picture he had taken of a

member of staff, Ron explained, "*Staff help out if anybody needs*".

Information on what staff do, and what tenants do for themselves, can of course be got at through interviewing. I received such information sometimes quite removed from the photos at hand. According to Rebecca, "*staff are them that watch out for us*". And they do so in various ways it seems; as Ron remarked, "*I guess it's them that keep an eye on the money*." In general, staff are the people who know how. Photos sometimes brought this very much to the fore, e.g. Richard underlined it when assuring that; "*Susan's washing the floor in this picture. That's really cleaning there in that picture*".

On the other hand, members of staff are the comers and goers who only work here - some of them work only part time even. Pointing to her notice board in a photograph, Ruth talked about her weekly schedule that hangs there. (The schedule says what is to be done and when, and it is made together with (or by) staff as an aid for the tenant in keeping up necessary routines). Without the schedule, Ruth said, *the staff* would not know what they were supposed to do at her apartment. From this starting point, Ruth was very articulate about what her need for help is, what she can do and what needs to be done for her.

These grouped homes arrangements have supplied people with a home of

their own, while the possibility for help still is there. The tenants, e.g., may in fact shoulder the responsibilities for housework, or the staff might, or the two of them in co-operation. In many interviews, instances of a collaboration to get things done are reported. Looking at pictures of themselves doing something, informants would comment on how things generally are handled. Starting with a photograph showing Robert by his bed, holding up the covers, he pointed out that when the bedclothes need changing, he takes them off, and Susan puts on new ones. "Sometimes maybe we collaborate," as, in another instance, Ron puts it.

Discussion

Photographers: There is a tendency to include only the more able people when predominantly verbal methods of inquiry are used (Simons *et al.*, 1989). Conscious of this tendency, I had chosen the places I went to visit so as to find informants with varied levels of intellectual disability. Yet, it seemed necessary to ask for nominations of people who likely would be able to use the camera after instruction, and who used some verbal language. A lesser focus on the interview part of this project would have allowed for informants who might be able to take photographs while not being able to talk about them. No informants completely without verbal language were sought out this time though, in future research

it would be prudent to keep this possibility in mind.

None of the informants were required to sign a consent form. Instead, each person was simply asked, in the company of others, for their participation. This seemed sufficient at the time. One can, however, question the way in which I have gone about securing consent. In acquiring the signatures of significant others, and not of the people themselves, I am participating in a certain social construction of intellectual disability that is questionable though common. By choosing the broad road over the straight and narrow path, however, I avoided scepticism and interference from these significant others. They are concerned people who watch out for the welfare of the persons that I wanted to interview. Any protest from these actors would probably stop my contact with informants short. Though the tenants all were legally of age, the procedures applied in securing consent were chosen to insulate from potential criticism making my presence a problem.

Photos: It seems clear that some of the photographs taken by informants carry interesting information even without comment by the photographer. On the other hand, some photographs did not spark much commentary from the informant - whether the photographer was s/he or I. This project supplied no conclusive evidence for considering what sort of images best spurred stories.

The striking difference between researcher-as-photographer and informant-as-photographers was the inclusion/exclusion of situations where tenants receive help from staff.

Supporting and following up on the photographers: Implementing a plan of follow-up visits to the photographers should reduce staff involvement during the photographic “assignment”. Confidentiality issues also underline the need to reduce staff involvement. For it should be as Robert commented; when I told him he should decide for himself whether to show his pictures around or keep them to himself, he said, “*It can stay secret a little*”.

Concluding remarks

It is clear that people with intellectual disabilities can produce photos showing interests (Holst et al., 1995). I submit that such informants also make intelligible and interesting ‘answers’ to the assignment I proposed in this project. The idea of informant-as-photographer was not utilised to the extent even these slight experiences suggest it could be. More extensive use of the informant-as-photographer approach might well, as Wang and Burris (1994) put it: “*..listen into speech... voices that ordinarily would not be heard.*”

In future research, I intend this method to be part of my “arsenal” while doing fieldwork even though I don’t have indications that photography lessens the need for time in inquiry. This is not

necessarily some sort of short cut, getting to know the people involved in the research and establishing trust are still prerequisite. For the researcher-as-photographer, it will also involve time to find the images that are to start off the conversations. Ample time to acquaint informants with the camera is necessary. Also, it is important to find ways of dealing with the need for assistance that individual informants have, when they are to participate as photographers.

Regardless of who the photographer happened to be, photographs from their everyday life supplied the researcher with contextual clues to understand the actual speech of individual informants in the interview situations. The photographs also provided more of a concrete base for our conversations than mere verbally formulated questions would do. In many cases, in fact, the conversations stalled as we ran out of pictures. More came out of the interviews when some time lapsed between photography and interview. The format of the actual photographs made less of a difference.

The photographs brought the focused situations back to the conversations, the interview becomes situated. The joint investigation of the pictures created instances of *serendipity*, especially where the informant used the photographs to talk of things not evident in the images, making comments or telling the story that the photograph shows only a part of. In this way, the

informants were using voice and directing the interviews to themes of interest to them, as opposed to only answering about topics that might be mostly of interest only to me. Also, in such instances, questions I posed in the following seemed mostly to be treated as paces in conversation rather than as scrutiny and examination. While otherwise, the experience was that conversation came to a halt more easily if I became inquisitive based on what I wanted to know. In a more 'traditional' interview situation, I could either be successful or unsuccessful in obtaining answers to questions on topics I had planned for. The occurrence of serendipity, on the other hand, opened interesting lanes of inquiry not so prepared, but of interest in the daily lives of my informants. And that was, after all, what I had been looking for; ways of hearing from people with intellectual disabilities what they think about their daily life circumstances. And always, as with any interviewee population,

Recognizing that some people may be harder to interview than others, it remains the task of the interviewer to motivate and facilitate the subject's accounts and to obtain interviews rich in knowledge from virtually every subject. (Kvale, 1996; 147)

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Notes:

1. All names given here are pseudonyms, and to inform readers: residents are given names that begin with an R, a name beginning with S then signifies that it is staff we are dealing with. I found this idea of signalling with the capitol letters in Gustavsson (1998).
2. *Volunteer* may imply a non-paid visitor as often seen in the UK, for instance. In Norway there is less of this tradition. I am actually referring to someone who is paid (though in a low wage bracket) for their time, usually 2-3 hrs a week, to participate in leisure activities with a person who has a disability. The vernacular use of the term is in order to distinguish between such a person and e.g. part-time staff.
3. The actual term in use is a Norwegian one: *Bofellesskap*. The translation offered here is the best I can do; *Group Home* implies less autonomy and individual space, and *Community Housing* implies less of the proximity to others with a similar disability than is the case here.

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