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# Photo-Elicitation Interviews—a Possibility for Collaborative Provocation of Preconceptions

*Visuality Design in and for Education*

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## Abstract

This article investigates researchers' methodological preconceptions when aiming at insight by involving visual methods in focus group interviews. The authors examine the photos used in photo-elicited focus group interviews in a project investigating Chinese and Norwegian early childhood education master students and teacher educators' values and beliefs about proper artifacts for local and national belonging. They aim to adopt a "defamiliarizing mode" for their interpretations while emphasizing conflicting perspectives among the interviewees using provocative photos to prompt the discussion. To critically investigate the photos and problematize the authors' choices of photos that reflect their preconceptions, this article is structured around the research question: how can photo-elicited interviews (PEI) provoke researchers' methodological preconceptions? The conflicting perspectives were analyzed building on Bakhtin's concepts on outsideness, chronotope and polyphony. The authors' analysis surfaces new insight into the limitations and strengths of photo-elicited focus group interviews contextualized in educational research.

## Keywords

visuality design – photo-elicitation – focus group interviews – visual design – early childhood education – collaborative provocation – researchers' preconceptions



FEATURE This article comprises a video, which can be viewed [here](#).

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## 1 Introduction

Several researchers who are undertaking participatory design and emphasizing various stakeholder perspectives through interviews are asking for ways for the involved persons to express themselves (White, 2020; Clark et al., 2005). Due to limited possibilities to communicate through the spoken/written language that differs from country to country and culture to culture and being aware of the aspects of power that are inclined in (knowledge of) language, neither traditional interviews nor focus group interviews may provide the optimal tools to capture participants’ perspectives. These obstacles may explain why “...the use and development of visual methods and media has increasingly become part of mainstream academia across social science and humanities research and dissemination (White, 2020, ix). In early childhood education research, this is especially the case when exploring children’s perspectives (White, 2020; Dockett et al., 2017; Lipponen et al., 2016; Ali-Khan & Siry, 2014), making inquiries into teachers’ values and beliefs (Taylor, 2002), and investigating early childhood education in different cultural contexts (Tobin et al., 1989; Tobin et al., 2009; Birkeland, 2020). Fewer researchers have investigated researchers’ values, beliefs, or preconceptions when aiming at insight by involving visual methods in photo-elicited interviews (PEI).

In PEI, visual materials have been used as data or as evoking materials for reflection and discussion among research participants (Tobin, 2019). Most research using PEI are discussing the text in the interviews and less the production and content of the photos (Piper & Frankham, 2007). However, photos are not neutral tools (Lipponen et al., 2016) or merely illustrations (Rose, 2016). Piper and Frankham (2007, p. 375) urged researchers to engage critically with visual texts and to “problematize the production, distribution, reception, and consumption” of visual images as part of the research process. In this article, we assume this challenge to critically examine the photos used in PEI in a project investigating Chinese and Norwegian early childhood education (ECE) master students’ and teacher educators’/researchers’ values and beliefs about proper artifacts for local and national belonging (Birkeland & Grindheim, 2021). We aim to adopt a “defamiliarizing mode” for our interpretations (Mannay, 2010) using provocative photos to prompt the discussion while emphasizing conflicting perspectives among the interviewees in the research material. To critically investigate the photos and problematize our choices of photos that reflect our preconceptions, this article is structured around the research question: *How can PEI provoke researchers’ methodological preconceptions?*

In the following text we start by position our research question among some dominant approaches to PEI, before we present Bakhtin’s concepts of outside-ness (Bakhtin, 1981), chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981) and polyphony (Bakhtin, 1984). These concepts are guiding our analysis and the discussion of the provocations that emerged from investigating our experiences from the interviews and how the photos shaped the discussion. Our aim is to gain insight into limitations and strengths of photo-elicited focus group interviews in educational research.

## 2 Photo-Elicitation Interviews

To contextualize our discussion, we will position our research question among some dominant approaches to photo elicitation as a research method. We start by explaining the concept of photo elicitation, followed by how and why pictures are relevant for focus group interviews and cross-cultural studies.

PEI, the use of photographs during the interview process, was first described as a research method, “photo-interviewing,” by John Collier and Malcolm Collier (1986). Photo/video-elicited interviews involve using still photographs or videos as questions in an interview guide (Bignante, 2010) to stimulate the interview process (Harper, 2002). The photos are introduced in the interview to invoke comments, memory, and discussion in semi-structured interviews (Banks, 2007, p. 87). A general perspective is that using images and video clips

in the interview process elicits talk on subjects that are complex to explore (Harper, 2012). The method has been included, among other established qualitative research methods and methodologies in anthropology (Pink, 2013; Rose, 2013), sociology (Harper, 2012), and education (Tobin et al., 1989; 2009).

The overall reason for using photo elicitation is to overcome limitations in spoken language when aiming at unfolding stakeholders' values, beliefs, attitudes, and meanings to trigger memories or explore group dynamics or systems (Prosser, 1998). Furthermore, photography and language are interdependent mediums for expression that have the potential to assist each other in making meaning of an experience. In PEI, the researcher assumes that the images, the meanings attributed to them, the emotions they arouse in the observer, and the information they elicit generate insights that do not necessarily or exclusively correspond to those obtained in verbal inquiry (Barthes, 1981; Collier, 1987). Language provides a "frame" for the visual experience and ways of assigning meaning to what is encountered visually, a place where to focus the meaning-making process, and a catalyst that can extend and enhance the interpretation of what the participants believe about the subject under study (Weade & Ernst, 1990, p. 133). PEI is forwarded as open-ended interviewing (Harper, 2012, p. 410); a non-directive method that, although initiated and guided by the researcher, is intended to grant an interviewee greater space for personal interpretation and responses (Lapenta, 2011, pp. 201–213). Therefore, we might state that this greater space is made possible because pictures/images are involved, and researchers can obtain deeper and richer insight into stakeholders' perspectives.

Furthermore, the nature of the method is described as intrinsically collaborative (Banks, 2007; Lapenta, 2011; Pink, 2013) and aims to stimulate a rich exchange of information by bringing an additional communicative element (Lapenta, 2011). By resisting single interpretations, photos can give rise to various alternative paths of inquiry (Pauwels, 2015) and seem to reach their aims, especially when used in focus group interviews with different stakeholders (Tobin et al., 2009; 1989; Birkeland, 2013). In the conversation between the researcher and interviewees, the meaning of the images can be explored and different interpretations elaborated upon; it can open the interview to opportunities for subjective and negotiated interpretations, descriptions, and meanings (Lapenta, 2011, pp. 210–211).

There seems to be an underlying assumption in PEI that people have a clear understanding of their opinions and that they only need a visual trigger or a pilot to address them. However, this assumption does not consider humans and practices as becoming and emerging (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2016) in the ongoing dialogical contextual meaning-making (Bakhtin, 1981). These limitations

are also representative of our project. We invited participants from China and Norway, knowing photographs to be an excellent medium to bridge cultural differences between strangers, often a difference shared by a researcher and his or her participants (Collier & Collier, 1986). According to Collier and Collier (1986), an image can be a reference point that offers a language that transcends cultural differences for discussions of the familiar or the unknown. Thus, we observed a rich exchange of information (Birkeland & Grindheim, 2021) but excluded the discussion of how the PEI involving provocative photos also challenged and widened our methodological understanding. We were concerned about the verbal interpretations without really discussing the images. We had the idea that from a Norwegian perspective, the images could be provoking due to the general attitude toward guns and military artifacts in Norwegian kindergartens. In addition, we did not expect the participants to doubt their utterances, nor did we expect our preconceptions to be challenged by the responses to the pictures. In this article, we aim to explore more information from the participants by investigating how the PEI provoked our methodological preconceptions. This aim follows the rationale for using photo elicitation to facilitate an opportunity to evoke participants' tacit and taken-for-granted perspectives (Guillemin & Drew, 2010). For us, this is not only relevant for the interviewees but also the researchers' taken-for-granted perspectives.

### 3 Collaborative Meaning-Making

We find Bakhtin's concepts outsidership, chronotope and polyphony to be relevant for our understanding of how photo-elicited focus group interviews can provoke researchers' methodological preconceptions. Bakhtin (1981; 1990) emphasized "outsidership" as the most powerful level of understanding. Furthermore, he argued that outsidership is necessary for creative understanding, which means defamiliarization and opening oneself up to new potential (Morson & Emerson, 1990, pp. 54–55). People located outside the culture in both time and space will ask more questions than the insiders. Concurrently, the outsiders to Chinese or Norwegian culture—like the participants in our interviews—undergo the same process, helping to comprehend unsuspected potential and leading to greater self-awareness of one's values and beliefs.

As an outsider, "one doesn't merely "cross" boundaries, as if one could neatly fit into another set of axiologies and ideologies with minimum effort or minor adjustment" (White, 2013, p. 146). However, boundary encounters, as liminal spaces, embrace uncertainty as a legitimate, perhaps even desirable, way to expand and transform understanding. The chronotope of threshold is,

according to Bakhtin, a symbol of boundaries and encounters related to crises, visions, decisions, or some sort of turning point (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 157). The chronotope of the threshold is not a geographic place. It is more of a symbolic place triggered by perspective changes, discontinuity, unfinalization, and surprise, creating shifting thresholds of meanings and thus providing a means of operating on the boundaries of meanings (White 2013, p. 151). Hence, Bakhtin defined the chronotope of the threshold as the chronotope of high emotional and value-laden intensity that became evident in the discussion about military artefacts.

Another perspective from Bakhtin (1984) informing our research is the concept of polyphony. The dialogical encounter in photo-elicited focus group interviews can engage with a polyvocal exchange and confrontation of utterances (Cao, 2020). An utterance responds to previous utterances and pre-existing patterns of meaning and seeks to promote further responses (Bakhtin, 1986). Bringing photos into the focus group interview enhances the utterances as polyvocal. The utterances may “replace or oppose one another, contradict one another, or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 252), but they never become one or the same. This is even more so in boundary encounters, including verbal utterances from different stakeholders and visual utterances, as in the photos illustrating guns and military artefacts.

#### 4 Evoking Teachers' Values and Beliefs on Proper Artifacts—an Example

The research by Tobin et al. (2009; 1989) has had a formative influence on our research project about teachers' beliefs about proper artifacts in education for local and national belonging. This project will be used as an example of PEI for insights. Our research was motivated by a kindergarten visit in the western province of China just after the national celebrations for the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic of China. One part of the classroom was filled with artifacts from branches of the sea, air, and land-armed forces, and the children were wearing military uniforms. The national celebration of the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic of China is a shared event all over China and a part of the national curriculum of ECE. However, kindergartens do this differently. To us, as Norwegian early childhood education researchers, kindergarten was a quite shocking image of a war zone, but to the principal, it seemed the most natural thing to do.

During our visit to a kindergarten, we produced approximately 150 photos of the educational environment, artifacts, and activities. After returning to Norway, the photos (15) from this classroom caught our attention and awakened our interest in taken-for-granted approaches toward military artifacts introduced in kindergartens (Birkeland & Grindheim, 2021).

The photos were introduced in photo-elicited focus group interviews and were selected to evoke conflicting arguments around the legitimacy of (not) using military artifacts in kindergartens, thereby revealing taken-for-granted practices. The PEIS were based on six researcher-produced images of military artifacts in Chinese classrooms. The first picture (Picture 1) displays a military obstacle course with two children in military uniforms crawling in a shooting position. The walls are decorated with military symbols and colors, and people in uniforms. The second and third pictures (Pictures 2 & 3) show exhibitions of military weapons and vehicles from three military branches. The fourth picture (Picture 4) shows a combination of exhibition and military artifacts made by children. The fifth picture (Picture 5) shows a group of children dressed in military uniforms. In the sixth photo (Picture 6), two children sit in a military tank with their teacher cheering beside them.

We organized two different focus group interviews. The participants were recruited to provoke an interplay between insiderness and outsiderness. One of the focus group interviews included four Chinese and Norwegian early childhood education master students. The interview was conducted when the two Chinese master's students had a mobility exchange to Norway. The Norwegian students had been exchanging students with China before the interview. This means that the participants had some insider and outsider experiences and knowledge about both Chinese and Norwegian kindergarten practices. In the second focus group interview, we included four kindergarten teacher educators and researchers. They all had extensive experience and knowledge of Chinese and Norwegian early childhood education. None of the Chinese participants were insiders of the specific Chinese classroom or the local cultural context of the specific kindergarten.

The aim of including different stakeholders from different cultural contexts was to explore and elaborate on polyphonic interpretations of the images and possibly conflicting perspectives on military artifacts in kindergartens. The discussions were not intended primarily as a path to the fusion of horizons but as a Chronotope of the threshold, triggering perspective changes, discontinuity, and surprise, and thus providing a means of operating on the boundaries of meanings.

In the interviews, we showed the photos separately and asked the participants what they saw and what their reactions were to what they saw in the photos. After they were introduced to the six photos, the participants were asked what they thought the teacher wanted to achieve by introducing the military artifacts in the classroom. Finally, they were asked how they would legitimate or not legitimate using military artifacts in kindergarten. We deliberately used photos from a kindergarten where all the participants, considerably, were outsiders to prevent a self-reported approach that might limit capturing the teachers' actual beliefs and encourage an alternative to accessing teachers' beliefs.

The different interpretations and shapes of reality among the participants informed us of the complexity of using photo elicitation as a research approach. The discussions and reflections during the PEI s disturbed and fortified our preconceptions of photo elicitation as a methodological approach. First, the interviews provoked our taken-for-granted assumptions about the characters of the presented photos and artifacts. Second, our assumption about the open-ended character of PEI s was challenged. Finally, we found that our preconception that bringing different stakeholders into play in photo-elicitation focus group interviews would evoke taken-for-granted values and beliefs was challenged.

## 5 Preconceptions Provoked



VIDEO 1 Preconceptions provoked. (See [here](#).)



## 6 Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Our analysis materialized the complexity of dialogical meaning making (Bakhtin, 1981) when employing PEIS as a methodological approach in cross-cultural research. Four major concerns of the PEI methodological approach will be further discussed. First, our analysis revealed the potential of using PEI when evoking participants' values and beliefs in cross-cultural research. The PEIS represented boundary encounters, a chronotope of the threshold, that embraced uncertainty as legitimate and a desirable way to expand knowledge (Bakhtin, 1981; White, 2013). When confronted with the images and other participants' polyvocal interpretations, a diversity of and somewhat contradictory perspectives evolved (Bakhtin, 1981). Hence, the polyvocal meaning-making between insiders and outsiders and the images challenged the preconceptions of all stakeholders involved, including the researchers, and provided fertile ground for dialogical meaning making and creative understanding (Bakhtin, 1981).

Second, to take the collaborative character of the methodology seriously in cross-cultural research, the research design needs to include visual materials from both cultural contexts (Tobin, 2019). In our case, that would mean including photos from both the Chinese and the Norwegian early childhood education context. Thus, practices, values, and beliefs in both contexts would be under scrutiny (Tobin et al. 1989; 2009). A research design including visual materials from both contexts will put more perspectives into play and reduce the feeling of someone being under attack and having the need to defend their practice. In addition, this will better align with the open-ended character of photo elicitation by resisting single interpretations and giving rise to alternative paths of inquiry (Pauwels, 2015) and creative understanding (Bakhtin, 1981). We underestimated the power of the images, expecting humans to stay close to the discussion of proper artifacts. What we experienced was the opposite: the images' uneven balance between the photos as cultural representations became evident in a polyphone dialog with collaborative meaning-making (Bakhtin, 1981).

Third, our analysis underlines the power of images and visual materials. Although our intention with the research approach was to use the images as a trigger to evoke attitudes and beliefs about the use of military artifacts in kindergarten, the images gave other directions for interpretation, such as the esthetic dimensions of the artifacts in the photos. As researchers, we did not pay sufficient attention to the emotional and esthetic aspects of the images and that the PEIS as chronotope of thresholds are specifically emotional and value-laden and with high intensity (White, 2013). Therefore, our underestimation

of the power of visual materials in PEI is evident. This happened despite our emotional reactions when we first saw the military artifacts in the kindergarten. Thus, our analysis supports the perspective of Radley (2010) that visual researchers need to pay attention to the ideological, esthetic, and emotional dimensions of the images.

Finally, our analysis highlights the importance of noting how visual and verbal modes of presentation support each other in meaning-making. If we want to take seriously that opinions, values, and beliefs are emerging and changing and not immediately easy to articulate (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008), the interplay of visual materials and the confrontation of various perspectives in the discussion among the participants are crucial (Cao, 2020). This was amplified by our finding that the visual material and perspectives of others in the PEIs triggered perspective changes, discontinuity, and surprises and thereby helped to articulate, nuance, and partly change values and beliefs. In this way the PEIs as boundary encounters represented turning points in the dialogical meaning-making (Bakhtin, 1981; White, 2013).

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