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Pictures have been used as part of the research process for centuries across a range of disciplines. The aim of this paper is to discuss the reliability and validity of using visual representations in the research process. In this context, visual images include video film, photographs, hand drawn pictures, and graphic representations. Through an analysis of the researchers’ experience with different visual mediums across six separate studies, the advantages and disadvantages of this form of data capture are debated.

Pictures are found to be a communication tool that resembles language. As such, it is subject to the cultural interpretations and misinterpretations of those receiving it. On the positive side, the studies find that pictures can capture a truthful representation of the item under study. They provide richness to the data set that compliments the understanding of interviews, observation or other methods of data capture. They assist the researcher to reveal hidden constructs that otherwise may not be uncovered and are an excellent tool for driving interviews, revealing sensitive stories and documenting incidents. The paper provides examples from the six studies to demonstrate these advantages.

On the negative side, pictures as signs are icons which are themselves prone to deception. (An icon is a sign that conveys meaning because of its close resemblance to the object.) False signs occur when the inter-relationship between language and extra linguistic signs deceive others and oneself. For example, ‘deception’ may include where people mistake appearance for reality. Visual representations also tend to be more invasive, are arduous for participants to conduct and may tend to skew findings when the content provided by participants is discriminated by photo choice. Therefore using the visual representations requires extra care by the researcher in ethical constraints and can cause reluctance with participant recruitment.

From a semiotic perspective, visual representations provide a more holistic and accurate reflection of the shifting paradigm of the culture. They enable the researcher to identify the cultures codes and the movement within these codes from residual to emergent trends over a specified time period using an ‘outside in’ approach. Within the context of reliability and validity this paper proposes guidelines for using visual representation in the research process.

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