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Tracing Stories: The Power of Photos and Timelines in Mental Health Research

Dr. Raginie Duara , Prof. Anna Madill

University of Leeds, the United Kingdom

Abstract

Verbal interviews remain an essential and powerful method in mental health research that not only help researchers explore lived experiences but also offer rich insights into how individuals make sense of their lives. However, in some contexts, particularly those involving complex, layered, and sensitive experiences, participants may benefit from additional modes of expression. Drawing on two qualitative studies, one on quarterlife crisis experienced in two cultures, and the other on substance use among women in the UK, this presentation explores the value of the combined use of photographs and timelines in complementing and assisting talk-based approaches. Rather than focusing on the outcomes of these studies, four key themes are discussed that highlight the power of these visual tools in mental health research: (1) Agency in Storytelling demonstrates how participants shaped their timelines to reflect personal stories, its structure and rhythms; (2) Floor for Laying Context showcasing participants' use of timelines and photos to situate their stories within their personal contexts, including family background and future aspirations; (3) Bird's Eye View, enabling both participants and researchers to gain a holistic perspective on the narrative arc, witnessing changes and constants over time; and (4) Tackling Discomfort where photos and timeline posed as a platform supporting participants' navigation through the interview while sharing complex, sensitive experiences with the interviewer. Through visual examples and participant feedback, this presentation reflects on the influence of photos and timelines in facilitating communication and deep understanding of lived experience, while creating a space for reflection and meaning making.

Keywords: Innovative Methods; Participatory Research; Qualitative Methodologies; Temporal Mapping; Visual Elicitation