

MÉTODOS CREATIVOS EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN:  
BUSCANDO UNA INVESTIGACIÓN PARA LA ACCIÓN

CREATIVE METHODS IN RESEARCH:  
TOWARDS RESEARCH FOR ACTION

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RESUMEN

Los métodos creativos, como la música, teatro, artes visuales y escritura, se han utilizado de forma creciente como herramientas en pedagogía, pedagogía social y trabajo social, con resultados prometedores durante los últimos años. Los métodos basados en el arte pueden ofrecer un canal para la autoexpresión, la autorrealización y mejorar los contactos interrelacionales y el sentido de comunidad, también para quienes de otra manera tendrían problemas para expresar sus sentimientos y pensamientos.

Definimos el uso de métodos creativos de investigación y se dan ejemplos de cómo utilizarlos en la investigación. Se analizan sus ventajas y limitaciones, junto con lo que se debe tener presente al utilizarlos y analizar los datos. Los métodos presentados y analizados son la foto-voz, el juego de rol pasivo, las entrevistas asistidas por fotos y el método del espacio abierto como ejemplos de las opciones. El enfoque en todos estos métodos es participativo y pro-activo para crear conciencia propia o de la comunidad para el cambio. El enfoque es similar a la pedagogía social con el objetivo de acción comunitaria.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Métodos de investigación creativa, investigación-acción, pedagogía social

ABSTRACT

Creative methods, such as music, drama, visual art and writing, have been used as tools in pedagogy, social pedagogy and social work in increased amounts with promising results during last years. Art-based methods can offer a channel for self-expression, self-realization and enhance inter-relational contacts and sense of community, also for those having otherwise problems of expressing their feelings and thoughts in a dialogue.

In the article the use of creative research methods is defined and examples how to use them in research are given. The article analyses the advantages and limitations of the methods and what should be taken into account when using them and analyzing the data. The methods presented and analyzed in the article are photo voice, passive role play method, photo assisted interviews and open space method as examples of the options. The approach in all of these methods is participatory and pro-activation to create self- or community awareness for change. The approach is similar to social pedagogy with its aim towards community action.

KEYWORDS

Creative research methods, action research, social pedagogy

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Can you speak about creativity in the context of research? Is it not just following the set procedures of accepted research process standards as they have been developed during the history of science? These questions might be asked when talking about creative research methods though many would agree that research in itself includes of a lot of creativity, starting from finding a research question. Research process is a complex activity including a set of multiple decisions: How to frame the topic, how to formulate the research question, what kind of methods to collect the data and how to analyze it. All of these decisions involve creativity.

In the quantitative research the proper process is more standardized than in qualitative research where, in fact, in the beginning you might have only a vague idea of the research question which in a way reveals itself through the research process. On the other hand, the almost classical division to quantitative and qualitative research has been challenged by mixed-methods research. Mixed-methods research is commonly understood as a research which uses variety of data collection methods for example combining both quantitative and qualitative approach or combining several kinds of data sources within quantitative or qualitative research. (Creswell, 2003; Fielding, 2010.) Mixed methods research is often related to the philosophy of pragmatism. Since the world is a complexity, the truth is complex as well, and connected to the social, historical, economical, cultural and political context. Mixed methods can offer different ways to understand the phenomena in question.

As often stated, there is not a single good or bad method as such, but method should be chosen in relation to the research question in hand.

What about the research purpose within social pedagogy? Social pedagogy is a diverse and broad concept with different approaches. There is no one European tradition or understanding of social pedagogy. As an idea social pedagogy (*sozial pädagogik*) first started being used around the middle of the nineteenth century in Germany as a way of describing alternatives to the dominant models of schooling. However, by the second half of the twentieth century social pedagogy became increasingly associated with social work. Social pedagogy is a central and well-established part of children's welfare services in most countries in mainland Europe and is becoming more recognized in UK as well (Hämäläinen, 2003; Moss & Cameron, 2011; Smith, 2009.)

In Finland, social pedagogy is connected with social work and education as well. At the university, students can study social pedagogy as a separate subject (often connected to either social work or youth work) and at the universities of applied sciences, social pedagogy is an orientation within BA studies. The common feature in the education of social pedagogy in Finland is, that core elements in the studies are holistic approach, dialogue, participation and creative skills. In research, social pedagogical approach suggests (or demands even) methods that are participatory and collaborative. Since social pedagogy stresses democratic dialogue and non-oppressive practices, it is logical, that the research methods used should also follow the same approach and be able to voice the views and needs of persons or group themselves.

## 2. CREATIVE METHODS AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Participatory or advocacy approach in research arose during 1980s and 1990s based on works of scholars such as Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas and Freire. Participatory action research (PAR) has been made known especially by e.g. Kemmis & McTaggart (2005). (Bergold & Thomas, 2012.)

PAR does not simply involve research participants in the construction of knowledge about them but involves research participants in the construction of their own knowledge for their own purposes. A core ethical principle in PAR is the equalization of power between the researcher and the participants and mechanisms to ensure equality in decision making (Stuart, 1998).

To be able to avoid oppressiveness of the researcher should proceed collaboratively no to further marginalize the participants taken part in the inquiry. This means that the participants may help in design questions, collect data and/or analyze information or receive rewards for participating in the research. The "voice" for the participants becomes a voice for a reform. (Creswell, 2003, p. 11.) In a way, a researcher becomes a facilitator. This position also can raise consciousness of the participants and be a catalyst for social action.

How to enhance the collaborative and democratic dialogue in a research process? Survey forms and structured or semi-structured interviews are researcher-driven and suggest the participants the role of an object. In social pedagogical research, the voice of the participants ought to be heard in such a way, that involves the participants to take part from the formu-

lation of the research question up to the analysis process.

How can creative research methods be worthwhile in this? Creativity has been theorized by breaking into categories, out of which, the definition between a “small c creativity” and “big C creativity” is a common one (Kara, 2015, p. 12; Sternberg, 2006, p. 6). Big breakthroughs and new theories take place more seldom in science but small creativity happens in all research. Creativity is nowadays more viewed as a process of creating something new from elements that already exist, by combining them in a new way. Creativity in research tends to resist binary or categorical thinking. Mixed-methods are an example of this. (Kara, 2015, p. 11, p. 15.)

Creative research methods can be variety of methods but one definition groups them into arts-based, narrative-based and redefined methods (Kara, 2015, p. 16; Rapport, 2004, p. 8-14;). Arts-based methods are visual and performative, narrative methods focus on stories and most often verbally expressed and redefined methods use existing research methods in a newly arranged way. These latter can be e.g. netnography which is ethnographical methods used in online environments. (Kara, 2015, p. 16.)

Creative methods in this article are understood as methods which fulfill three conditions:

Imaginative and/or include ideation process

Allow participants to express themselves freely without structured or semi-structured questions

Include reflective discussion about the data (either individually or in a group) for sense making and sharing and

Allow possibility to take part in the analysis.

Four different methods were chosen to be presented here shortly with some examples of their use.

### 3. EXAMPLES OF VERSATILE RESEARCH METHODS WITH CREATIVE TOUCH

The following examples of methods have been chosen on the basis of that they are a) qualitative and give participants option to express themselves freely b) can be used with a group (some also individually) c) offer a possibility to participate in the analysis and d) can be empowering or pro-activating.

Each of the methods are easy to use and can be applied with variety of groups.

#### 3.1 OPEN SPACE

Open space is method which is based on a simple observation that all the best discussions in the conferences and seminars are taking place during the coffee

and lunch breaks. Open space simulates a period of a break or a cocktail party where people form groups freely and can change from a group to another when they wish to do so. In this sense the method differs from many regular group methods such as learning café where group divisions and time to move from one topic and/or one group to another are managed by a facilitator.

In open space the participants talk about what they want to talk about (within a certain selected theme) and in that way, the choice of what is important lies on the people themselves. Open space is an energizing method which gives the responsibility to the participants themselves.

The principles of an open space method are:

Whoever comes is the right people: Whoever is attracted to the same conversation are the people who can contribute most to that conversation, because they care about the theme.

Whatever happens is the only thing that could've happened: The present is here and now.

When it starts is the right time: The creative spirit has its own time, and our task is to make our best contribution and enter the flow of creativity when it starts.

When it's over, it's over: The clock is not important but the feeling. If you do not have anything more to add, change a group.

The law of two feet means that you yourself take care of your contribution and by standing up and using your own feet, you move to whatever place you can best give your input and/or learn.

(Videos from open space: <http://www.openspaceworld.org/wp/2009/04/08/collected-videos/>; more information about open space method <http://openspaceworld.org/wp2/explore/open-space-research/>)

The process of the open space can vary from one day to multiple days depending on how much towards actual planning a course of action or a strategy is aimed for. As a research method, open space can be used e.g. enhancing discussions on what are issues for concern in a community or for example in a school. Agenda for topics are created by the participants themselves within 30-40 minutes and after having all topics of concern listed the participants can start, in free order and free groups, discussing about the topics. The one who suggested the topic takes care that the main points from discussions are noted down. In the end of the session the notes are shared and summarized. The process might continue the next day, if planned so, to continue from the first

day results to another open space session with e.g. planning concrete actions.

The facilitator's role in the open space method is mainly to start the process, brief the rules of the method and then not to interfere to the process.

How to use open space in a research? Open space can be used for collecting data from various community members about how to enhance community spirit in a locality. Different groups could be invited to open space session in different days to create a safe environment (e.g. a day for older population, youngsters, immigrants etc.) for interaction. After the open space sessions, the notes will be summarized and analyzed. The results are then to be presented to a larger community meeting and/or local politicians for voicing the needs and views of the participants.

Open space is an example of crowdsourcing – using the wisdom of a crowd for identification and solving problems. More about open space method from Harrison (2008) and e.g. from <http://www.grunt.ca/engage/assets/OST.pdf>.

### 3.2 PASSIVE ROLE PLAY METHOD

Passive role play method can also be called as empathy base story method or just story telling. The method originates in 1960s when concerns about the ethical questions were roused in social psychology about laboratory based tests where participants were exposed to emotional situations for testing. The method of empathy based story does not bluff or manipulate the participants. The roots of the method of empathy based stories are in Anglo American research but it has been quite much used in Finland after Jari Eskola (1998) brought to method to wider attention by making his PhD and writing a guidebook and articles about it. The empathy based story method can be used in active or passive form of a role play. In this article the passive role play method is described in brief.

The method means that the participant is asked to write a short story about the ideas and views a given frame story has raised in his/her mind. The frame story describes a situation (usually in future) and the participant continues the story by telling e.g. what might have happened before or will happen after.

The participants are given a short frame story and asked to write the continuation (with possible guiding questions) in a short given time, e.g. 20 minutes. The frame story is varied so, that another version of the story is given after the first one. The first story might have been a positive description

and the second a negative one, or vice versa. There might be several versions of the same frame story, but seldom it is worthwhile of having more than three different versions, since the participants might become tired. The data might also be collected by mail or e-mail, nowadays also by Facebook, but collecting data face to face ensures more responses and offers an opportunity to collect some feedback after the writing session.

Analyzing the data can be done by content analysis or theme identification. The benefits of the method are that often it is fairly easy to use, not oppressive or intrusive and thus is usually well received. The opportunity to emphasize with a situation brings out thoughts, attitudes and values which might not be expressed if asked directly in an interview. Compared to a focus group interview, the method is not subjective to discussion leaders who might steer the views in the group. Role play story telling also gives an option to collect data from a bigger number of participants than what is often possible with interviews or focus interviews since they are much more time consuming.

Presently the undersigned and a colleague Amanda Woodward from the Michigan State University are conducting a comparative study about how the present day 60+ year olds think about their life situation when they are 84. One of the methods used is the empathy based story telling. The “When I am 84...” -research is using two frame stories of positive and negative future situation into which the participants are asked to imagine themselves to be and then write about how they are living, with whom and in which kind of surroundings, what are they doing during the day etc. The target is to collect future stories from 100 persons in total, half from Finland and half from USA. (Koivula & Woodward, 2016.)

### 3.3 PHOTO ASSISTED INTERVIEWS

Photographs are more and more popular since visual culture is prevalent nowadays with digital cameras, smart phones and sharing photos via social media such as Facebook, Instagram and also YouTube. Photos are a powerful method to express feelings and interpret and represent the world. Digital cameras and mobile technologies have opened the photography medium to many and thereby democratizing the medium to many. Young people especially seem to share their everyday life events almost daily, what they have eaten, what they have done and where have they been during the day.

The use of visual methods in the field of qualitative research has evolved over the last 30 years. Re-

searchers initially used visual recordings to obtain a visual story as evidence (Yates, 2010). Though this is not yet abandoned, visual methods are used in a more versatile way by providing new knowledge. Visual methods, such as use of photographs, can offer a deeper understanding of a person's or group's views, meanings and values that what would be able to be captured by interviews or questionnaires. It has been said also that the value of these methods is in involving socially excluded groups and empowering the more disadvantaged, giving them choices in relation to the subject matter and supporting communication when having difficulties in expressing things orally or by writing.

Photos can be used in different ways in research. Photographs taken by participants can form the basis for an interview and trigger responses and memories and unveil attitudes, views, beliefs and meanings which do not normally appear in an interview situation. (Fullana, Pallisera & Montserrat, 2014; Harper 2002.) The technique has gained followers among sociologists and anthropologists and has been used across a range of academic subfields such as sociology of childhood, youth studies and education. (Yates, 2010; Meo, 2010).

The method also contains some drawbacks: practicalities of providing cameras for photographing, ethical issues of using photographs of persons and longer interview time are some of them. But on the other hand when prepared with care, the process of the research can be rewarding both the participants as well as the researcher (Meo, 2010; Pain, 2012).

Instead of photos taken by participants, drawings can also be used. Drawing a lifeline as a river or a mountain serves both as an interview technique but also give the participant a chance to reflect his/her life.

In a Master thesis done by Tuija Vainionpää-Seilo (2016) from villages of Parkano, Finland, one of the methods used, was taking photos of the village and in a community evening the villagers wrote what the pictures of places, houses and nature meant to them. In this the photos were taken before hand by the researcher but the meanings, comments and analysis of what are the important meaningful places for a community spirit, was done by participants themselves.

In another project related to improve employment services in the city of Tampere (TUTTU-6Aika -project) the long-term unemployed people were asked to pick up from a pile of magazine pictures and post cards four pictures that express a)

what they like about the service they are receiving, b) what they do not like, c) what is an important value for them and d) what is their dream. Each of pictures were taped on a paper and participants could write comments on the paper and pictures. After this individual activity the stories were shared in small groups (Koivula, Kemppainen & Kumpulainen, 2016).



Picture 1. Picture from future workshop photo method in a Master thesis done by Tuija Vainionpää-Seilo

The above examples are some of the abundance of ways photographs can be used when interviewing people and also to induce dialogue within a group or a community. Photographs carry meanings and reflect emotions that are otherwise difficult to be expressed orally.

### 3.4 PHOTO VOICE

Photo voice is an arts-based, qualitative research method with a link to participatory action research. It is rooted in a desire to decrease social and cultural power differentials in the research process. (Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison et al., 2004; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001.)

Photovoice was first developed by Carolin Wang and her colleagues in 1990s in a Ford Foundation-supported women's reproductive health programme in China. (Capous-Desyllas & Forro, 2014, pp. 151-152; Wang & Burris, 1997). Since then photovoice has been utilized to illustrate community needs and to involve participants in a research process to create social and political change (Capous-Dysellas & Forro, 2014, p.152).

Photovoice method proceeds from giving cameras to individuals who then use photographing to identi-

fy and represent their life and/or communities. Visual techniques provide a window into participant's life, relationships, feelings and perceptions. With photos these feelings and perceptions can be communicated to others. Photovoice method has been used to influence politicians and other decision makers to advocate change in the community or social policy.

The main goals of photovoice are a) to enable people to record and reflect their group's strengths and concerns, b) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about community issues through group discussions of photographs (sharing views) and c) to reach out to policy makers and others who can or should be mobilized for change. (Wang, Cash & Powers, 2000)

Since its creation, the method has become popular and has been used in a variety of research with participants of all ages and in different parts of the world. Most researches have been dealing with topics related to health and social justice but there are no limitations to the topic as such. (Catalini and Minkler, 2010; Hergenrather, Rhodes, Cowan, Bardhoshi & Pula, 2009.)

Using photovoice needs paying careful attention to ethical questions. Consent forms from participants and from people (if involving taking photos of other people) need to be received prior to taking photographs and when releasing pictures for a publication (e.g. exhibition). Ethical issues need to be discussed in briefing the participants and instructions where photographs can be taken and where not (according to e.g. legislation) and also informing and getting consent from places where photographs are planned to be taken, if e.g. a school or a work place. Prints of photographs should also be given to those who are photographed. Several of these ethical questions were raised by Harley (2012, pp. 331-334) who also stated that in a way, for example, by asking some special community members, e.g. volunteers, to take photographs from a certain community, are we just creating another power imbalance, instead of a researcher having power of the camera, in this example, volunteers have it over the community?

Using photovoice method can be a very influential tool but it should be used in such a way, that the power of the camera is really given to the participants themselves and that they do not, in their turn, oppress or intrude any other with it.

In an ongoing study, which was already mentioned before, "When I am 84...", participants in their 60s-years of age, are asked to take photographs from things, symbols or people (not showing faces to maintain anonymity e.g. from the back) representing

things/issues that they fear, want to maintain, wish to have, want to get rid off...etc. in their own old age. For each photograph that the person takes he/she writes some commentary about why this photo and what does it symbolize. (Koivula & Woodward, 2016.)

After participants have taken photographs from the selected themes, the photos are developed and printed and discussed about. From the photos the ones representing the most compelling issues are selected together and arranged for a larger exhibition for public. The photos are anonymous and by them the themes of concerns and dreams are presented. The process serves both participants themselves for sharing their views as well as via publication advocates the expectations for future elder care. The study is being made comparatively in the USA and in Finland to see what are the similarities and differences (Koivula & Woodward, 2016.).

Several manuals have been written about photovoice process (e.g. Palibroda, Kreig, Murdock & Havlock, 2009; Photovoice Hamilton, 2007). Examples of photo voice projects can be found from <http://www.photovoiceworldwide.com/projects.htm>.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The article has touched briefly about social pedagogical, participatory approach in research for action and presented some methods which can be used in these kinds of research. My strong vision is that research ought to step into a new era, that of combining art-based and participatory methods into research. We are living the area of the sixth way described by a Russian economist Kondratieff. The sixth way means that the barriers between those who know and decide with those who do not know and obey are broken. Social media and internet has created a world where everyone can have a say and voice their world view and thoughts. The former, traditional world with authorities in science and politics are challenged with co-creation and group intelligence through e.g. crowdsourcing. In social work and in health care, the user-centred service design approach is more and more stepping in. Collaboration and transparency are the key elements in the society (Wilenius & Kurki, 2012).

Thus, also in research, we should step down from the high horse of studying social phenomena and social behavior as things, like once stated by Durkheim, but involving people themselves to the process of research as partners, not as objects or just informants.

The methods are not without limitations, like any other research method. All of the methods require

skills of a moderator or a facilitator who is willing and able to work with people in a collaborative and participatory way. This presents problems familiar with action researchers, dealing with the schizophrenia of being “in and out” at the same time.

Methods such as open space technique, empathy based story writing and photo assisted interviews or photo voice are all examples of methods that involve the participant in ideation, reflection, sense-making, analysis and also in dissemination. Should it not be the future of social pedagogical research?

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