Article

The Evocative Power of Projective Techniques for the Elicitation of Meaning

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Abstract

A unique project was undertaken by doctoral and postdoctoral students, and their mentor, from diverse backgrounds in health and social sciences to explore their past experiences as participants in a qualitative research training initiative called EQUIPP (Enhancing Qualitative Understanding of Illness Processes and Prevention). The purpose of the project was to create a symbolic representation of the EQUIPP program through the use of projective techniques. The authors examined the meaning of engaging in qualitative research training through images and conceptual metaphors that were subsequently consolidated thematically and then portrayed in the form of a newly constructed logo that was developed with the assistance of a professional graphic designer. Projective techniques proved to be a powerful,

evocative tool for eliciting meaning and translating concrete experiences into visual discourse. In this paper, the authors discuss how projective techniques were operationalized and consider their broad implications for qualitative research.

Introduction

The potency of imagery . . . is that it has the capacity to transcend the boundary between the outside world and what is happening inside us.

—A. Branthwaite, 2002, p. 165

Qualitative researchers are interested in how people perceive an experience and the meaning that is associated with a particular phenomenon (Schwandt, 1994). Qualitative researchers rely heavily on interviews as the medium through which to encourage participants to articulate their thoughts and feelings. In an attempt to promote genuine conversations with research participants, researchers design interview questions to overcome social norms and to elicit unfiltered responses. Yet we often wonder if we compel rational, sanitized, and self-conscious responses within the confines of language which, in and of itself, filters and limits expression of meaning. Qualitative researchers also rely on the powers of observation and astute analysis of documents to add to participants' insights, but, again, these strategies do not provide direct opportunities for accessing meaning.

Because of the limitations within our current data collection tool kit, qualitative researchers are seeking other strategies for eliciting meaning. Many qualitative researchers are turning toward arts-based inquiry and the use of collage, poetry, painting, drawings, and photography to enable artist-participants to express meaning embedded in the historical, cultural, and biographical contexts of their lives (Costantino, 2003). We, the authors of this paper, would like to introduce projective techniques as a viable alternative to interviews, observation, and document analysis for the elicitation of meaning within qualitative inquiry (Levin-Rozalis, 2006). Through our logo development project, we have firsthand experience into the potential inherent in projective techniques for the exploration and elicitation of meaning. In this paper we describe our experiences with these powerful tools for tapping into human experience. We expand on our example to consider the broader research implications.

Projective techniques

Projective techniques are strategies used to access presumably hidden content and emotions using visual stimuli and imagery. They facilitate expression of internal content that is often subconscious or difficult to articulate by circumventing cognition, rational thought, and

normative responses. Projective techniques are predicated on the assumption that a person will cast his or her unfiltered (perhaps socially unacceptable) perceptions, feelings, and desires onto neutral or ambiguous images (Branthwaite, 2002). Social scientists typically classify projective techniques according to the mode of response elicited. Commonly employed are the five classifications of projective techniques that were developed by Linzey (1959):

1. associative techniques: an assortment of stimuli are presented to draw out an individual's immediate thought;
2. completion techniques: individuals are expected to complete a sentence or finish a drawing;
3. constructive techniques: individuals are asked to compose a story, to mould a sculpture, or to paint a picture;
4. choice/ordering techniques: individuals are asked to rank groups of pictures or sentences; and,
5. expressive techniques: individuals are directed to respond to a given stimulus through self-expression (e.g., role-playing, drama or dance).

When taken together, these techniques allow research participants to draw on hidden meanings by working with stimuli and modes of expression that are not usually encountered in everyday life, thereby making it possible for them to connect with their experiences in novel and as yet unrefined ways.

Historical application

Although we are proposing new applications, the use of projection and projective techniques is not new. It is possible to trace the evolution of the use of projective techniques in various fields. The conceptualization of projection as a mechanism by which individuals assign subjective perceptions, feelings, and desires onto other people or objects without the inhibition of rational scrutiny is derived from psychoanalysis, in particular Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) clinical work on personality and paranoia (Hussey & Duncombe, 1999). The father of psychoanalysis used associative techniques as a strategy to access unconscious motives and desires that he believed were the major determinants of human behavior. By asking patients to provide immediate thoughts about a particular stimulus, Freud was able to explore subconscious processes and personality characteristics (Steinman, 2009).

In 1921, Rorschach introduced the notorious inkblots as vague stimuli to reveal subconscious psychological strata (Levin-Rozalis, 2006). By the 1930s, psychiatry, clinical psychology, and the field of cultural anthropology had adopted projective techniques for research to measure human attitudes, knowledge, and perception. The popular Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), which consisted of a series of black-and-white drawings and other prominent tools, was developed in 1935 to assist with assessment of personality traits (Ramos, 2007).

In the field of classic psychology, projective techniques continue to be used widely in several topical areas, including the evaluation of personality and personality disorders. Also noteworthy are the decades of psychological studies conducted to inform the marketing of products and services, based on the fact that brand images are designed to evoke certain associations in the minds of consumers. By asking study participants to combine brand images with objects, people, and animals in the form of analogies, marketing professionals have been able to draw inferences about emotional and intuitive responses to brand features, and use these insights to plan better advertising strategies and media campaigns (Ramsey, Ibbotson, Bell, & Gray, 2004; Steinman, 2009). Similarly, marketing professionals have relied on projective techniques as a qualitative

research tool when they are conducting motivational research. It is purported that motives driving consumer choice is primarily unconscious as opposed to rational (Dichter, 1960), and it is qualitative researchers who are able to cast some light on underlying forces (Donoughue, 2000).

Important examples of the application of projective techniques can be drawn from social science research conducted in developing countries. For instance, pictures and storytelling were instrumental in Freire's (1998) lifelong devotion to raising consciousness and promoting emancipation among the economically disadvantaged in Latin America. Freire's Brazilian participants were able to reflect on oppressive forces in their lives when significant events and circumstances were visually presented in theatre, slide, or story form.

Current application

Qualitative researchers are increasingly using visual aids, chiefly photographs, to collect data and, in turn, present their findings. Thus, imagery is employed as a significant tool during the research process and also serves as the research product. Witness, for example, methods such as photoelicitation and photovoice whereby, photos are taken by the researcher(s) and/or participants to uncover informant emotions and values. Researchers gain new insights as the informants respond to the images and as they attribute personal comments and meanings. Such innovative methods are putting cameras in the hands of participants, who are often oppressed, allowing them to capture and then to subsequently represent their own perspectives (Bignante, 2010; Harper, 2002). As a visual medium, photographs have continued to communicate everyday realities and support the mandate of international organizations and goals of educators, researchers, and community advocates seeking to form alliances for change, disseminate knowledge, and influence policy decisions (Wang, Burris, & Yue Ping, 1996).

More recently, new methods using pictures and storytelling have been adopted by qualitative researchers. For example, these methods were used among lower income Hispanic American women to overcome cross-cultural miscommunication in order to tailor community-based programs to better address needs and concerns (Ramos, 2007). Women's experiences are also the focus of social science research conducted in Kuwait involving women who had lived through the Saddam Hussein-led Iraqi invasion. Given the women were only children at the time of the invasion, projective art tasks crafted a visual language to depict the women's early childhood memories (Pepin-Wakefield, 2008).

Qualitative researchers within other disciplines are either discovering or demonstrating a resurgence of interest in the heuristic power of projective techniques to investigate internal attitudes and beliefs that underlie human behavior. Health scientists use projective techniques to draw out idiosyncratic thoughts relative to sensitive subject matter (e.g., cancer and invasive screenings) within an African American context that might otherwise be blocked by patients' psychological obstacles or social barriers (Wiehagen et al., 2007). Nurse researchers explore implicit assumptions shaping the propensity of obstetrical nurses to promote certain medical interventions such as cesarean sections (Regan & Liaschenko, 2008) through a variant of the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), mentioned above.

The Project: Designing the symbolic representation of EQUIPP

Background

In 2004, a one-year transdisciplinary training program in qualitative inquiry was funded for tenure of six years under the name, Enhancing Qualitative Understanding of Illness Processes and Prevention (EQUIPP). The program was designed to meet the critical shortage of qualitative researchers with the expertise required to teach qualitative methodology, supervise graduate students, and serve as principal investigators on research grants. Over the tenure of this transdisciplinary program, masters, doctoral, and postdoctoral trainees from clinical psychology, education, human ecology, nursing, public health, rehabilitation sciences, rural sociology, and sociology gathered to engage in discussions about qualitative research. Our discussions were profound and intense. We spoke creatively, passionately, and sometimes with a tinge of judgment, making ourselves vulnerable to each other. We talked about what we did and did not trust about knowledge and its production. We vied for what we believed were ethical and moral epistemologies by debating what we thought was knowledge, how it can be created, and the most just way of creating it. Although there were times of disagreement, we did concur that participation in the EQUIPP training program was truly enriching and an invaluable contribution to our academic lives and professional practices.

By 2007, the EQUIPP program reached a point of maturity that necessitated broader recognition and recruitment. Promotional materials and a public relations strategy were developed, and to this end, interest was expressed in creating an EQUIPP program logo. A *logo* is a graphical representation that serves to communicate an organization, company, or program's identity. The purpose of a logo is to ensure that the organization can be immediately recognized and that it can be differentiated from other organizations in a similar market (Wheeler, 2006). As qualitative researchers invested in the integrity of the EQUIPP program, we decided not to contract-out the logo design work. Instead, we elected to engage in a participatory process and to employ projective techniques to create a logo that could capture visually our experiences with, and feelings about, the EQUIPP training program.

Operationalization

Construction of the EQUIPP program logo took approximately 9 months. Throughout the course of our project, we retained all materials produced during our meetings, such as images, collages, transcripts, notes, drawings, and draft logos, so that we could refer to them often, remind ourselves of previous discussions, and ensure that no ideas were lost. Between meetings, we often committed perceptions and interpretations to paper and shared them with each other. We especially did not want to lose track of those musings and impressions that warranted further deliberation when we reconvened. Our project consisted of three phases. We illustrate the phases, assigned tasks, and details in Table 1, and then we explicate each phase one at a time, paying special attention to how we employed projective techniques.

Phase 1: Preparatory Activities

The use of projective techniques for the coconstruction of a visual representation (logo) of the EQUIPP program was dependent on both collaboration and creativity. Thus, we first established an interdisciplinary (sociology, psychology, organizational studies, physical therapy, and public health nursing) creative working group (the authors of this article) comprising doctoral and postdoctoral EQUIPP research trainees and our mentor.

Table 1. Construction of the EQUIPP Program Logo

Phase	Task	Task Details
1	Preparatory activities	Form an interdisciplinary creative working group
		Select images from magazines and the worldwide web that represented what EQUIPP meant to each group member
2	Projective techniques	
	Associative techniques	Respond to questions with embedded images (e.g., a planet is an image) such as: If qualitative research were a planet, what would it be like?
	Completion tasks	Complete sentences such as: Qualitative research is_____ .
	Choice/ordering	Prioritize themes with the graphic designer's assistance
	Constructive techniques	Transform themes into images
3	The EQUIPP Logo	The graphic designer takes the interdisciplinary creative group's themes and imagery elements (e.g., colors and shapes) and portrays them symbolically
		The group chooses and modifies the final logo design

Prior to assembling as members of our newly established group, we were directed by our group leader (third author) to select images from magazines and the worldwide web that we believed represented what EQUIPP meant to us on a personal level. More precisely, each member responded to the question, What does EQUIPP mean to me? by mounting media images on a poster board to form a group collage. This premeeting exercise served as our prelude to projective techniques and warmed up our imaginative processes, our creativity. Some of the media images chosen included a globe of the world that depicted the international complexion of EQUIPP, a lamp that portrayed the generation and illumination of new ideas, a diamond that represented the multifaceted, multiparadigmatic nature of qualitative research, and a puzzle that symbolized the complex inductive process of qualitative inquiry. With our minds primed, we were then ready to continue our process of inquiry.

Phase 2: Projective techniques

We operationalized projective techniques by incorporating Linzey's (1959) classifications of projective techniques: associative techniques, completion tasks, choice/ordering, and constructive techniques. Each projective technique came with an assignment. The assignments involved working with conceptual metaphors and visual images to explore, describe, and represent our experiences as EQUIPP trainees. During our group meetings we found ourselves talking about our experiences within the EQUIPP program itself, about qualitative research in general, and about characteristics of qualitative researchers. It was difficult to distinguish elements of the EQUIPP program from characteristics attributed to the entire enterprise of qualitative inquiry.
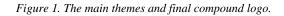
First, we used associative techniques by reflecting on our experiences with and feelings about EQUIPP/qualitative research, prompted by questions with embedded images (e. g., planet, landscape, and inhabitants) such as: If qualitative research were a planet, what would it be like? One member of the creative group stated that qualitative research would be a planet with variation in topography, like jungles. Another member nodded, "You're right. There would be jungles and deserts too." In addition to variation, authenticity seemed especially important. One of us in the group stated, "I think it would be a planet where things are what they are. They are
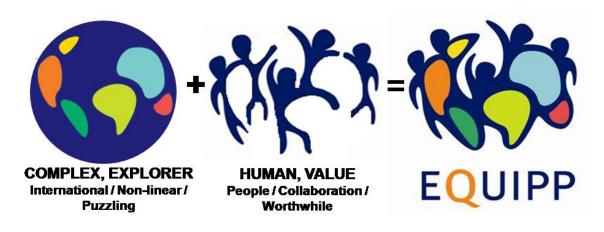
real and not manufactured." Also asked was, And the landscape? "The landscape would be vast with a big sky, yet there would also be thick forests through which you have to find your path, and water would be plentiful because qualitative research findings contribute to health and well-being." And the inhabitants of this planet? "The inhabitants," we agreed, "would be every color, size, ability, talent, and extreme of human being." Next we pondered, What if qualitative research were a person? "The person would be well educated, maybe a philosopher, a poet, an artist, a Bohemian. Characteristics of a rugged, curious explorer would also be evident as this person would be well prepared for discovery."

Second, completion tasks were assigned, during which we completed sentences such as: Qualitative research is . . . and Qualitative researchers are. . . . We were to add descriptors at the end of each sentence. Our responses and deliberations were audiotaped and transcribed. Individually and then collectively we conducted a thematic analysis of the transcription and abstracted almost 25 themes linked to our adjectives and the multifarious assortment of visual material and conceptual metaphors compiled up to this point (e.g., analogies such as dark tight cavernous spaces, expansive horizons, a kaleidoscope of discoveries; references to ideas like mysterious, messy, multidimensional, intercultural, integrity, open mindedness, and involvement of all our human senses). Individually we wrote about certain themes and then shared our musings with one another during our next creative group meeting. For example, "Qualitative researchers are curious," one of us explained, "in terms of seeking to capture the unique and often elusive nuance of phenomena. Curiosity is more than a state of mind; it is an attitude that calls for researcher sensibilities of humility, openness, and tolerance of ambiguity. Humility and openness speak to letting go of control and suspending judgment. Tolerance of ambiguity is a much-needed attribute when curiosity takes us to places of the unknown that are often misunderstood, confusing, and contradictory."

Third, with the assistance of the graphic designer who joined us at this point, we narrowed down our selection of themes. We prioritized the themes of *explorer*, *human*, *complex*, and *value*, demonstrating the projective technique of choice/ordering. Complex and explorer were represented by images and descriptors portraying the international, nonlinear, multifaceted, and puzzling nature of our qualitative research training. Human and value, as indicated by conceptual metaphors reflecting characteristics of people-intensity, collaboration, and the worth of the qualitative research endeavor, portrayed our belief that EQUIPP is a team of diverse, creative people who seek to optimize the discovery and unveiling of human phenomena.

Fourth, we resumed our collaboration with the professional graphic designer to capture and represent our EQUIPP learning experiences symbolically. The designer had us perform a projective art task of transforming themes into images, demonstrating the use of constructive techniques. We were given the opportunity to explicate our themes visually, but this time we did the actual drawing under her expert instruction. New conceptual metaphors and images were formulated by randomly selecting two of our earlier themes (as described under completion tasks) and drawing a picture of these unique combinations. For example, we combined *defensive* and *diamond* to develop the idea that qualitative research is multifaceted, yet, at times, misunderstood. Similarly, we randomly joined *complicated* and *forest* to illustrate the thick description, diversity, and density that are characteristic of qualitative research. Combining these themes prompted us to think about the metaphors in new ways, hone our conceptualization of the program and qualitative research, and ultimately inspire the creation of the visual representation, the logo.

Figure 1. The main themes and final compound logo.

Phase 3: The EQUIPP logo

Finally, it was the professional graphic designer's responsibility to take our themes and imagery elements (e.g., colours, shapes, and drawings) and portray them in the form of a logo. Collaborating with the graphic designer to choose and modify the final logo design proved to be an unexpectedly difficult task. She proposed several logos, and although we had agreed that value, human, complex, and explorer were the EQUIPP attributes that we most wanted captured, it took intense, lengthy deliberations before we could reach consensus on how they should best be rendered (see Figure 1 for final selection).

Implications for qualitative research

The EQUIPP program logo was expected to serve two purposes. Conventionally, the logo had to symbolize the training program and provide a means for instant program recognition. Unconventionally, the logo had to be developed through a participatory process and the use of projective techniques that would encompass our unique trainee experiences and resonate with each one of us as diverse trainees. Throughout our participatory endeavor, projective techniques linked our qualitative research training experiences to stock media images and conceptual metaphors, which in turn stimulated group discussion and reflection, yielded multiple imaginations, uncovered several themes, and elicited rich meaning. Projective techniques enabled us to give voice to inner feelings and motives associated with qualitative research (in general) and with the EQUIPP program (in particular). From our perspective, the implications for qualitative research inquiry are threefold: projective techniques provide researchers with the facility to explore deep pre-conscious thoughts; creative groups serve as an ideal research setting for the adoption and implementation of projective techniques, and; visual discourse can enhance the dissemination and translation of research findings.

First, the evocative power of projective techniques were made evident by the very fact that if we had been questioned verbally about the EQUIPP training program/qualitative research and required to respond in the conventional cognitive style of communication (e.g., the interview), we do not believe that the core themes—human, value, complex, and explorer—would have emerged, or at least not as readily. We also conjecture that there would not have been the same level of intense deliberation. Group tension, albeit a productive form of unease and apprehension,

resulted from the fact that the process of developing the logo did not proceed in a straightforward, analytical fashion but resembled a recursive, overlapping pattern of image or stimulus, then theme, then stimulus again. We never knew what to expect, and thus our responses were spontaneous and intuitive. Having to explicate the essence of visual material presented and expound on the themes incited both positive and negative emotions as we continuously worked to counteract rational scrutiny of unconscious and diverse feelings and ideas. However, without visual stimuli and creative art tasks, the meaning of our concrete experiences as EQUIPP trainees could not have been articulated and conveyed sufficiently to the professional graphic designer, and consequently, she would have been confronted with a much more arduous task.

Second, our use of an interdisciplinary creative working group mirrors the marketing practice of brainstorming and the use of think tanks led by social and organizational psychologists, during which projective techniques stimulate problem-solving (Hofstede, van Hoof, Walenberg, & de Jong, 2007). Marketing professionals, especially, take advantage of this special discussion group to foster the discovery of fresh ideas, hypotheses, and solutions. Similarly, our creative working group was not only a productive venue (i.e., having achieved a graphical representation of EQUIPP); it also served as a safe environment within which we could share immediate perspectives, experiment with conceptual metaphors, and freely express ideas and contentions verbally and/or in art-form. Despite our diverse backgrounds and unique perspectives, we were committed to establishing an environment where we could share our views, embrace critique, and discuss our experiences in a constructive, nonjudgmental way. The diversity of our group allowed for multiple perspectives within an atmosphere of respect and openness, which led to richer, broader, and more meaningful interpretations of our training experiences than would have been possible without such collaborative inquiry. Without a doubt, the creative group is a suitable setting for the employment of projective techniques and a vital structure for this type of meaning-making.

Third, an important research goal for any research project beyond the stage of participant involvement is the selection of strategies to disseminate and to translate research findings which leads to our third and final implication. The knowledge mobilization/knowledge translation enterprise seeks to strengthen the connections between research/evidence and policy/practice. However, rarely is the research report considered effective in doing this. In addition, funders and even research participants are growing tired of the research report. Funders no longer consider the research report a sufficient output from publicly spent research money, and research participants started complaining long ago that their stories were dulled and their emotions lost in the research report. As such, scholars are struggling to find ways to communicate their findings in ways that will promote change. The research enterprise that produces imagery and other artistic forms of expressions are being explored as "a medium for telling a participant's story credibly, vividly, and persuasively" (Saldaña, 2003. p. 218).

Conclusion

Our creative and collaborative use of projective techniques was an opportunity to learn how visual stimuli can transcend rational interpretation by evoking pre-reflexive thoughts and feelings located in our private worlds. We gained firsthand insights regarding the applicability of projective techniques to qualitative research. Essentially, our project could be considered analogous to a process of qualitative inquiry, but with the difference being that we were both posing the questions and responding to the questions. And as such, we can attest to the power of projective techniques for the expression and transformation of the meanings inherent within an experience (e.g., as an EQUIPP trainee) into an abstract graphical representation (e.g., the

EQUIPP logo). Building on a growing trend in social science research, our use of visual material as data adds to what can be expressed through dialogue and verbal accounts alone. As well, our new logo illustrates another avenue for the representation and dissemination of research findings.

Postscript

As we prepared this paper, of particular interest was the notion of ethics. Should our project have had ethics review? As the participants in our own inquiry, do we need consent from ourselves? To answer this question, we turned to the ethical requirements for methods where the researcher(s) are the only ones involved in the research, for example autoethnography and collective biography, and also ethical requirements regarding creative works. As researchers in Canada, we are guided by the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2010). However, before the the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada or the Agencies could develop this joint policy statement, they had to determine what is considered to be "research." We found it interesting that "scholarship based on personal reflections and self-study where no one other than the researcher is involved in the research (e.g., autoethnography)" (TCPS Subgroup on Procedural Issues, 2008, p. 5) is considered not research but an activity and therefore does not require ethical review. This, of course, brings up a second point about autoethnography not being considered research. However, the most immediate concern about whether ethical review was needed was at least resolved; "research" where the researchers are also the participants in the inquiry does not need ethics review in Canada. Of further interest to us was our involvement in the production of an image and how this intersected with ethical requirements. According to the TCPS2 (2010) research exempt from ethics review includes not only "creative practices" but the "study of the process of how a work of art is generated" (p. 20). Again, from this perspective, our "research" was exempt from ethics review.

However, even though ethics review was not required for our project, this did not absolve us from acting ethically. We were neither cavalier with our process nor reckless with each other. As all researchers must do, we carefully moved through our project with a commitment to and respect for each other and to the generation of new knowledge. Consequently, we encourage all researchers to think through all of the ethical issues that lay within their projects, regardless of an external governing body's requirements for formal ethics review.

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