

Qualitative Research Methodology

for Photographic Psychology

(QRM-PP)

**John Suler, PhD
Professor of Psychology
Rider University
2013**

Photographic Psychology is the study of individual differences in how people create, share, and react to images, focusing on digital photography and online photo-sharing. As a form of participant-observation research that integrates subjective and objective analyses of information, its Qualitative Research Methodology includes:

A literature review and research topic	2
The research questions	3
The research journal	3
Creating images	3
Online field research	4
Photo interviews	5
The research paper	10

Literature Review and the Research Topic

You chose the topic you are studying. It is based on your personal interests – the overlap between photography and psychology that has meaning to you and your life. Photographic Psychology involves participant-observation, which means that part of your mission is to understand yourself as well as the topic you chose.

After choosing a research topic, your review of the background literature related to it will help you better understand what is already known about it. Ideally, your topic should be exploring new areas or ones that are not fully understood.

Although online resources can be useful, the full text of many important academic articles and books cannot be accessed online or without paying for them online. Therefore, you will need to research the hardcopy literature as well. Also, not all webpages are truly valid as academic references. To determine the professional accuracy and value of a webpage, consider these criteria listed below. No article should be included formally in your research (i.e., you cite it in your paper), unless it satisfies two or more of these criteria:

1. Authority: The credentials of the person or organization presenting the information are reputable.
2. Content: Information appears professional, well-organized, accurate, unbiased, and well-written.
3. Impact: A significant number of reputable people cite that webpage and review it positively (google enables you to search for links to a particular page)
4. Validation: Information on that page is confirmed by other sources (but beware of information that is simply copied from one site to another).
6. Timeliness: The information on that webpage is current and up-to-date.

Standard Texts: Although your literature review will be unique to your particular topic, there are some important standard readings that are essential to understanding *Photographic Psychology*:

Suler, J. (2013). *Photographic Psychology: Image and Psyche*,

<http://users.rider.edu/~suler/photopsy/index.htm>

(the essential text in which Dr. Suler explores the various topic areas in Photographic Psychology)

Weiser, J. (1993). *Phototherapy techniques*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

(the widely cited book for understanding the personal meanings people attach to photographs and how photography can be therapeutic)

Zakia, R. (2007). *Perception and Imaging*. Focal Press, New York.

(a comprehensive textbook about creating and perceiving images)

The Research Questions

Based on your background research, you create a title for your project that captures what new or poorly understood area of *Photographic Psychology* you intend to study. You then pose a series of four to seven questions that focus on specific aspects of your chosen topic. This series of questions are the foundation of your research. The purpose of your research is to answer them as thoroughly as possible. As you conduct your study, you may discover findings that were not specifically addressed by your research questions, but are related to your topic in important ways.

The Research Journal

The *Research Journal* is a document you create that includes two major sections. The first is the *Research Activities section*, which is a record of exactly what you did for each session that you devoted to your project, including the date, a title, a detailed description of what you did that day, and a table of contents for all these entries.

The second major section is the *Research Questions*, which contains subsections devoted to each of your *Research Questions*, with the question appearing as the title for each subsection. In these subsections, you list all of your ideas, insights, and findings that address those questions. These entries under the *Research Questions* might be complete paragraphs, single sentences, or even just phrases about some idea, insight, or finding. At the end of each entry indicate the date, which will probably correspond to one of the entries in your *Research Activities* section (i.e., the research activities that day which led to your idea, insight, or finding). If what you are recording comes from something you read, be sure to indicate what that article, book, or website was.

Use **ALL** of the qualitative methods you are employing to make entries into the *Research Questions* section of your journal: your literature review; your online field research; your creating, sharing, and reacting to images; and the photo interviews.

Creating Images

Another aspect of participant-observation will be your collecting, taking, processing, and sharing your own photos. You will examine the images you create as another way to address your research questions. Be sure to record any significant ideas, thoughts, feelings, and memories that came to you while working on your images.

Expanding your skills in taking and processing photos plays an important role in this part of your research – for example, knowing how to use such programs as Photoshop.

Unlike other forms of research, in participant-observation you become a subject in your own research. You examine your own thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and memories about creating and sharing your images. This requires the ability to “decenter” from your own personal experiences in order to understand them objectively. It requires the development of an “observing self.”

Some of the images you collect and create will be used in the set of photos for your interviews.

Online Field Research

Although photographic images and photo-sharing can be studied in-person, the vast amount of images online, as well as the large number of people sharing photos in cyberspace, makes it an ideal environment for *Photographic Psychology*. This aspect QRM-PP is “field research” or “naturalistic observations.” Online you will be examining photos that people upload to various environments, as well as their discussions about those photos. Investigate these images and discussions as a way to address your research questions. Keep in mind the basic elements of *Photographic Psychology*: how people create, share, and react to images.

You should collect or record the location of images online that seem especially relevant to your research topic so that you can view them later.

Because QRM-PP entails participant-observation, you can involve yourself in these online environments by sharing and reacting to images yourself as a way to explore your research questions. Your personal experiences and reactions while doing field research are data to be recorded and examined in your Research Notes. Discussions with your research supervisor, online and in-person, will help you understand your experiences during the project. Setting up a confidential online environment specifically with your supervisor will be important.

Here are some guidelines for doing online field research:

It’s OK to be a newbie - When you first join an online environment, remember that it’s OK to be a newbie. Don’t be afraid to ask people questions when you’re not sure what you’re doing, or to make mistakes. Just be yourself.

Learn about the environment – Learn as much as you can about the online environment you’re working in. This includes both the social aspects of how people behave there, as well as the technical aspects of how to navigate and use the tools of that environment effectively.

Hang out as much as possible – The more time you spend in an online environment, the better you will understand its social and technical dimensions. How people react to sharing images is partly determined by the qualities of that environment.

Socialize, Be Friendly – Talk to people. Let them know about you and your research. Learn from them. You might even connect with some people outside of that online environment – for example, via email or Facebook.

The Photo Interviews

You will use the images you create and others you collect (with permission from the photographer) as your photo set for conducting interviews. You might have between 10 and 20 images in your interview set. Although the interview can be conducted online, in most cases you will do it in-person. The purpose of the interviews is to address your research questions. Although you might show prints to your subjects, in most cases the interviews will require skills in displaying photos on a computer.

What is an Interview?

Interviews provide in-depth information about a particular research issue or question. Because the information is not quantified (i.e., statistical records and analyses are not used), the interview often is described as a qualitative research method. Whereas quantitative research methods (e.g., the experiment) gather a small amount of information from many subjects, interviews gather a broad range of information from a few subjects.

When we analyze the results from an interview we use the "hermeneutic method." We look at how all the statements made by the person are inter-related. What are the contradictions and consistencies? What is the "big picture" of what the interviewee is trying to say, and how does every individual statement from the interviewee relate to this big picture? The interview is a "holistic" research method: all the bits of data from the interviewee provide you a big picture that might be different than any one single bit of data.

If the interviewee is an expert on some particular topic or possesses some special skill or experience, his or her responses might be considered facts or opinions. In some ways this distinction is irrelevant. A good interview is the art and science of exploring the subjective knowledge, opinions, and beliefs of an individual. The knowledge, opinions, and beliefs of that person are a system. The purpose of the interview is to explore that system and all of its elements, including the personality, behaviors, lifestyle, and culture of the person.

Structured versus Unstructured Interviews

The structured interview consists of a list of specific questions and techniques. The interviewer does not deviate from the list or inject any unnecessary remarks into the interview process. The interviewer may encourage the person to clarify vague statements or to further elaborate on brief comments. Otherwise, the interviewer attempts to be objective and tries not to influence the interviewee's statements. The interviewer does not share his or her own beliefs and opinions. The structured interview is mostly a "question and answer" session.

The unstructured interview is more free-form. You might ask the same sort of questions as in the structured interview, but the style is conversational. You adjust your questions according to how the interviewee is responding. You may even inject your own opinions or ideas in order to stimulate the person's responses. Everyone is different and therefore everyone reacts to an interview differently. As the interviewer, your learning how to deal with these differences is an ART. The unstructured interview requires much more skill, and is much more complex and fascinating than the structured interview.

Unstructured Interview Techniques

The goal of these techniques is to get the person to express as many of their ideas as possible about a particular photo. You will be trying to help the person to: (1) open up and express their ideas, (2) express their ideas clearly, (3) explain and elaborate on their ideas, and, (4) focus on the issues at hand rather than wander too much into unrelated topics.

Here are some basic techniques and statements that can help you help interviewees to open up and clearly express their ideas:

Clarification: Getting people to further explain something that wasn't entirely clear to you:

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm not sure I completely understand. Could you tell me more about that?"

Reflection: Reflecting back something important people said in order to get them to expand on it:

"So you believe that ... "

"So you felt that ..."

"Then you do disagree with the idea that ..."

Encouragement: Encouraging people to pursue a line of thought:

"That's interesting. Could you say more about it?"

"Sure, I understand. Does anything else come to mind about that?"

Comment: Injecting your own idea or feeling to stimulate the person into saying more.

"I'd feel the same way. In fact ..."

"I agree. It also makes me think about ..."

Spur: Saying something to tease, spur, or challenge the person (in a friendly way) so they expand on their ideas. However, never consistently disagree or argue with them:

"But don't you think that ...?"

"Some people might disagree and say that ..."

"Do you really believe that?"

Refocusing: Encouraging the person to get back to the issues at hand when they wander off too far. However, remember that a person's tangential associations to a question could be important:

"That's interesting. Now what about that question about ..."

"I know what you mean, but let's get back to that issue about ..."

Summarizing: Try to summarize the person's ideas to see if you really understood what they said or to get them to expand on it:

"So what you're saying is ..."

"So your major point is that ..."

"Let me see if I can summarize what you've said..."

The Content versus the Process of the Interview

The "content" of the interview is WHAT the interviewee says. This is the easiest component of the interview to study, and tends to be what the novice focuses on. The most accurate way to record the content of the interview is by recording it.

The "process" of the interview is a much more elusive but powerful component of the interview. It involves reading between the lines of what the person says. It involves noticing HOW he or she talks and behaves during the interview. How the subject responds will give you more insights into the content of what he or she says. Your observations of the interview process may confirm, enrich, and sometimes even contradict the content of what the person says.

Think of the interview (especially the structured interview) as a standardized situation to which interviewees are exposed. The questions you ask everyone may be exactly the same, but everyone will react to the interview situation differently. These differences can be very informative. They reveal the "process." They will tell you much about the holistic picture (the big picture) of each interview session.

To explore the interview process, consider these sorts of questions:

- When does the person sound confident, uncertain, confused, convincing, illogical, etc?
- Does the person ever contradict himself or herself?
- How do the pieces of what the interviewee says fit together?
- At what points does the interviewee show enthusiasm and emotion, and what kinds of emotion?
- What is the interviewee's body language; when does it change, and why?
- How fast, clear, loud, and complex is the person's speech; when does this change?
- Does the interviewee's appearance or surroundings (e.g., his or her room) provide any insights?

One very important source of information about the process of the interview is how you personally react to the person. In a sense, you are using yourself as a thermometer to assess what happens during the interview. Ask yourself these questions:

- What thoughts and feelings do you notice in yourself during the interview?
- Do any pictures, memories, or daydreams flash through your mind?
- How do you find yourself behaving during the interview?
- When do your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors change in reaction to the interviewee?
- Do you react differently to different interviewees? What might this say about them, and you?

Understanding the process of the interview is a challenge. Getting good at it takes practice. Recordings of the interview are helpful, but also be sure to jot down ideas immediately after the session - especially ideas about your personal reactions to the interview and your observations of the subject's non-verbal behaviors. These are important aspects of the interview that an audio recording might miss.

Steps in Conducting the Photo Interview

- Establish rapport and provide information

Introduce yourself. Be friendly and professional. Establishing rapport helps the interview. Casual talk (the weather, etc.) at the very beginning of the session is usually O.K. but don't do too much of this.

In the informed consent that all subjects must read and sign, as well as verbally, you will provide basic information about the purpose of the research and what the interviews will entail. However, because the subjects will at first be encouraged to respond freely without being significantly influenced by the researcher, the information and instructions are kept minimal. The informed consent must tell the person that quotes from their interview might be used in a paper reporting the research, but that no information will be included that could reveal the subject's identity. The informed consent should also indicate that all records of the interview will be destroyed once your project is finished.

Record as much as you can of what the person says throughout the entire interview. An audio recording or exact transcript is ideal, including your noting the subject's non-verbal behaviors.

- Part 1: Silent Viewing (structured)

In this first stage you will present all the images in your set as a slide show, in an order randomized for that subject. Display each image for 5 seconds and use a simple fade transition. In this stage you are visually "priming" the subject without their having to react verbally. Say to the subject:

"I'm going to show you a slide show of pictures. Just focus your attention on them. There's no right or wrong way to do this."

- Part 2. Free Association (structured)

In this stage of the interview you will encourage free-responding from the subject. However, your interview style will remain very structured. Say the following:

"I'm going to show you those pictures again. When I first show you each one, just spend a few moments looking at it in silence. Then tell me ... (insert your interview questions here). Please remember that there are no right or wrong answers, so feel free to say whatever you're thinking."

The interview questions are those items - probably about three or four - that you have chosen based on your list of research questions. Show the photos one at a time, on a computer or with prints, in the same order as before. If the person forgets to respond to any of the questions that you posed, mention them again, but only do so for the first three photos. Also for the first three photos, say:

"Do you see anything else in the photo? Take your time to look at it some more, if you like."

If the person has no further comments, proceed to the next photo. If a person has questions or wants to engage you in a conversation, make a note so you can return to it during the *Inquiry* stage. Say:

"Good point. Let's talk about that later in the interview."

- Part 3: Spontaneous Recall (structured)

When an image stirs up emotions, it tends to linger in one's memory more so than images that did not. During this stage of *Spontaneous Recall*, you are attempting to assess these emotional images. The two techniques you will be using are *verbal recall* and *visual recall*. For verbal recall, say to the subject:

"Of all the pictures you just looked at, which one or two stand out in your mind, and why?"

If the subject only remembers one, say:

"What other one comes to mind?"

One at a time, go back to each of those images and say:

"Here it is again. Is there anything else about it that made it stand out for you?"

When the subject is finished, move on to visual recall. Say:

"Now close your eyes and try to picture that photo in your mind. Describe to me what you see, think, and feel while you are imagining it, even if what happens doesn't seem directly related to the photo."

- PART 4: Inquiry (unstructured)

During this stage use the unstructured interview techniques described previously in order to help subjects clarify and expand on their ideas. You are exploring the variety of thoughts and feelings the person might have in reaction to the images. Your goal during this stage of the interview is obtain more information that will help you address your research questions. Say to the subject:

"Now let's go through the images again so we can talk more about each one."

In the same order, show each image and summarize what the person said during the *Free Association*. Use the unstructured interview techniques to engage them in a discussion about each image. Keep a balance between allowing subjects to discuss whatever comes to mind and returning to your interview questions. If the subject had already talked about an image during *Spontaneous Recall*, say:

"You already talked about this one, but does anything else come to mind now?"

Whenever you aren't sure why subjects interpreted a photo in some particular way, say:

"What about the photo gave you that impression?"

- Part 5: Overview and Interview Ending (unstructured)

Display all of the images together, from left to right, top to bottom, in the same order as before. It's a good idea to have this window on your computer set up ahead of time. Ask the subject what reaction they have to all the images displayed together, and discuss that with them... Then say the interview is over, thank them, and ask if they have any questions.

The Research Paper

Your research paper should include the following main sections (in bold print and left justified) and subsections (underlined and left-justified)

Introduction

In the first few paragraphs of this introduction, explain the background of your study, including the concepts, theories, and research that provides the context to understand your work. By citing important references, you demonstrate that you have reviewed the literature related to your research project.

These first few paragraphs should lead into the last one of this introduction section, in which you clarify the purpose of your research and why it is significant in the context of the background information you provided. In this last paragraph, you concisely state your research topic, with the last sentence introducing a bullet-point list of your research questions by saying, “my research focused on the following questions:”

Methods

Online Field Research

Describe in detail what you did for your field research, including a description of the online environments you studied, how often and for how long you were there, how you observed or participated in these environments, the interesting images you collected, and conversations you discovered. Be as specific as you can.

Creating Images

Describe exactly what you did for collecting, taking, and processing your own photos. How many images did you collect? How many did you create, using what kinds of techniques? Mention that you examined your own thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and memories about creating and reacting to images.

Photo Interviews

In the first paragraph of this subsection describe how you created your interview set. How many images did you include? What types of images were they? What criteria did you use in deciding which images to include?

In the second paragraph, describe how you selected subjects for the interviews, how many subjects you had, and basic demographic information about them (age range, number of males and females, whether they were college students or other information about their occupation/lifestyle). Do not indicate any specific information that could reveal their identities.

Devote one paragraph to describing each of the stages of the interview and exactly what you did during those stages: “silent viewing,” “free association,” “spontaneous recall,” “inquiry,” and “overview.” Use the information in this manual to write this section.

Findings

Online Field Research

Describe in detail the important findings of your field research. Devote separate paragraphs to each of the following: (1) What images did you see and what did you learn about your research topic from examining them? (2) What important issues came up in online discussions you observed? (3) How did you see yourself reacting to, sharing, and discussing images online?

Creating Images

Describe what you learned about your research questions as a result of collecting, taking, processing, and sharing, your own images. How did you see yourself reacting to the process of creating and sharing images?

Photo Interviews

Devote one paragraph to each subject. Create a pseudonym for each person, preferably a name that helps you remember that person. Briefly mention the demographic information for that subject: age, sex, marital status, education, occupation, and any other information about them that is relevant to your research. However, remember not to indicate any specific information that could reveal the person's identity. Devote the remainder of the paragraph to summarizing important or interesting reactions the person had to the photos and the interview.

Conclusions

Divide this section into separate subsections, using left justified and underlined headings based on your list of research questions. In each subsection address each research issue by using ideas from your background literature review (cite references), your online research, your work in creating, sharing, and reacting to images, and the photo interviews. Many of the ideas you discuss should come from the sections of your Research Notes.

How to Use the Interview Data

The interview data should be an important part of your conclusion section. Including only brief quotes or references to what people said is a waste of the interview. Quotes that are out of context in your paper are also insufficient. Your goal is to thoroughly integrate the interview data into the topics and themes of your paper. Consider these questions:

- Did the interviews support, contradict, or add insights to the results of your other research methods?
- How did the interviews support, contradict, or add insights to the articles you read?
- How were the subjects' responses different and similar to each other?
- How did the "process" of the different interviews compare? Why was this important?

There are several ways you can refer to the information from the interviews: (1) summarize in your own words what the person said, (2) use short quotes of phrases or sentences to embed into a paragraph, and, (3) use a separate indented paragraph for longer quotes (a “block quote”).

The second and especially the third method will catch the reader's eye, so make sure you are quoting something important. Don't bore the reader with uninteresting quotes or statements that are trivial or obvious.

In the final paragraph of the paper, summarize the purpose of your research and your most important findings. What were the limitations of your study? How could it have been improved? What other interesting findings did you discover concerning your research topic that weren't specifically indicated in your research questions? Suggest ideas for follow-up studies.