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**Using Photography to Cross Generational,
Linguistic, and Cultural Barriers
to Develop Useful Survey Instruments**

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Abstract

Photography has been used as a research tool by field anthropologists and as a technique to empower special populations and catalyze advocacy groups and policy makers. In the case described in this paper, photography was used to develop a survey to study alcohol expectancies among Thai adolescents. A multi-cultural research team faced generational, linguistic and cultural barriers in seeking to understand Thai adolescent alcohol use well enough to write useful questions for a proposed alcohol expectancy survey questionnaire. The creative use of photography enabled the research team to gather information across generational, linguistic and cultural lines; it allowed representatives of the population of interest (adolescents) to express themselves without the imposition of an organizational framework by the investigators; and it generated new information on alcohol use and expectancies. Group discussions of the photographs revealed nuances and subtleties of behaviors and expectations involving alcohol that might otherwise not have emerged. The results of this project were used to refine an expectancy measurement scale to be used in the second stage of this study of adolescent alcohol expectancies.

Survey results are only as good as the questions asked

To improve our understanding of the context of health behaviors, survey research provides acceptable estimates of many variables. However, the quality of the data generated depends on the adequacy of the questions asked. It is difficult to write survey questions to explore social issues that have not been previously studied, that are rapidly changing, and that exist among groups quite different from the investigator's own. The absence of a database to establish concurrent validity and the absence of true expert panels further complicates the development of a good survey instrument.

Such was the case with our team, which had developed and used a self-report survey to assess adolescent alcohol use and alcohol expectancies among a sample of adolescents in Thailand. The results of the expectancy questions, when factor analyzed, suggested the measuring instrument could be improved and was likely missing important variables. It was difficult to revise the survey instrument without additional insight. We surmised that we were missing the more idiosyncratic characteristics of alcohol expectancies known only to our target group – Thai adolescents. The challenge was to find a way to view alcohol use through their eyes.

Elicitation

Elicitation is a qualitative attempt to allow representatives of a population to express themselves about a topic of interest without the investigator imposing an organizational or interpretive framework. Elicitation exemplifies the spirit of the anthropologist who seeks to understand the perspectives of the people being studied (LeCompte, 1999). Elicitation activities usually consist of participant observation, interviews, discussions, focus groups and written answers to questions (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Nastasi & Berg, 1999). These activities help investigators understand new or unfamiliar behaviors. We wanted to refine a quantitative instrument and we needed qualitative data to do so. For a variety of reasons the individual interviews and group discussions used in our initial elicitation had not provided adequate information. We had asked the Thai member of our team to conduct most of our elicitation activities, thinking she was best suited for the task. This procedure had clearly missed some important variables.

Conducting and interpreting interviews and group discussions depends on the interviewer having a good knowledge of the culture being studied. The Thai member of our team had grown up in Thailand, gone to university and

completed an advanced degree. This excellent education, however, meant she represented only a small minority of the Thai population. In addition, she was about ten years older than the population of interest. The rapid changes in Thai culture and adolescent behaviors meant her personal experiences and knowledge were outdated and her locus of understanding current students limited. Her gender further limited understanding because male and female roles and perceptions differ markedly. The Thai researcher's personal experiences during adolescence may have influenced how she interpreted the information she received. Language was not a barrier but the young people being interviewed were sometimes confused that a Thai would ask questions about topics for which they assumed the answers were obvious. Accordingly, they may have left important information out of their answers on the assumption that the Thai researcher already knew the information.

Earlier consultation with several other Thai colleagues had some utility, but it was limited by many of the same factors.

The non-Thai member of the research team had contributed in only a small way to the elicitation, and he faced age, status, culture, nationality and language barriers. All these factors limited discussion and influenced the way adolescents answered his questions. One advantage, however, was that the Thai adolescents

expected his questions to be naïve, and they attempted to answer questions fully, assuming he knew almost nothing of their culture or lifestyle.

The use of “informants” in the cultural anthropological sense would have allowed for long-term contact and the potential for consistent interpretations; however, time was limited. Observation and participant observation had limited value because adolescent alcohol use often occurred in settings not typically open to adults. The presence of an outsider observing the idiosyncratic and somewhat private behaviors associated with adolescent drinking would likely change the behavior that we wanted to observe.

Each of these methods had utility, but we sought a way to maximize the opportunity for collecting new data in a short time, not dependent on the investigators’ initiatives.

Background

Sketches and photographs made by investigators documenting the activities in the lives of special populations had been used to elicit descriptive and interpretive comments about behaviors or lifestyles of interest (Collier and Collier, 1986). In early references this technique was referred to as photo novella.

A photo novella is a picture story. The photo/sketch provided “participants the opportunity to spin tales about their everyday lives” (Wang and Burris, 1994).

Wang and Burris subsequently refined this technique to include giving cameras to local people to enable them to “act as researchers and potential catalysts for change in their own communities” as a means to enable change. The technique became known as photovoice. Photovoice encouraged people to record local events or conditions on film in ways meaningful to them and then to use the images as the basis for a dialog with policymakers. Wang and Burris (1994) recruited village women in China to photograph various aspects of village life and, through subsequent interviews regarding the photo images, gained new insights into the social organization of the village and the role of women. Later Wang, Cash and Powers (2000) used photovoice to document the lives of homeless people as part of a project on counter-stereotyping that aimed to establish a basis for dialog with advocacy groups and community leaders.

The use of photographs as an adjunct to the development of a quantitative measuring instrument and as an elicitation technique does not appear to be widespread. While anthropologists have for decades used photography to record and illustrate aspects of culture, no examples were found that used photographs in the manner described in this paper, i. e., to develop and refine questions for a quantitative survey instrument.

Method

We elected to use photographs to assist us to gain new insight into adolescents' perceptions of alcohol use. We were not interested in using photovoice for advocacy. Our purpose was only to refine a measurement scale to assess adolescent alcohol expectancies. Expectancies are learned, cognitive constructs about the outcomes of a behavior. The learning can occur without actual participation in the behavior itself. Thus, we were interested in a wider view of expectancies surrounding a specific behavior – what young people thought would be the result of using alcohol. We wanted a comprehensive view of all possible outcomes, both good and bad, that result from alcohol use, not necessarily a coherent view, because later research would provide coherence. We sought the viewpoint of our subjects, Thai adolescents, a view not easily accessible to us.

Six undergraduate students (three females and three males) were recruited from a Thai university near Bangkok. All students spoke some English. Each of the students was paid for a weekend's work. Students were given a supply of disposable cameras or paid for the cost of film and film processing if they chose to use their own camera. Students were asked to take photographs of anything they wanted related to alcohol. There was no limit to the number of photos they could take. The cost of film and developing was paid by the investigators. It was made clear that the investigators did not see alcohol use as either good or bad.

Students were told that the goal of the project was to learn more about alcohol, particularly alcohol use by young people, and to understand the reasons for drinking and what young people thought could result from drinking alcohol.

After the weekend, the photos were developed and returned to the photographer-students. The students had photographed activities of other people, activities in which they themselves were engaged, the environment, and effects of alcohol use. Researchers met with the students and asked them to explain and discuss individual photos that the students thought were significant. Typically the person who took the photo spoke first, beginning with a description of the content of the photo and any meaning it conveyed (“What is the significance of this picture?”). After the person who had taken the photo finished commenting, other students added corroborative statements, interpretations, and sometimes contradictory statements. The discussions, in other words, generated a wide range of new information. It was this group discussion among the photographers themselves that contributed to the richness of the results. Discussions of such richness would have been unlikely with solo descriptions of photos and probably impossible without the photographs. The photographs provided a visual image that grounded the discussion of a number of people, overcoming many of the cultural and linguistic barriers to understanding. Not only did the photos and accompanying discussion generate

new data for the researchers, they also tended to bring new insights to the photographers themselves, further enriching the discussions.

Students were asked if these discussions could be recorded. English was their second language and they were sensitive about their abilities. They asked that the discussions not be recorded. Because their English was not fluent, there was ample time for taking notes and for verbally exploring exactly what was being said about each of the photographs.

After the discussion, all photographs were collected and reviewed. Photos not discussed but of interest to the researchers were identified and discussed in a later session, which involved the same participants as the first discussion. The same discussion format was used and the same productive results obtained. Our objective was to obtain new information that could be used to write survey questions about alcohol expectancies. The procedure served us well.

Two members of the research team met afterwards, without the students present, and reviewed and discussed their notes and recollections. Both members of the research team had to agree on the validity of a finding for it to be considered valid.

A sample of the results

A brief description of some of the results illustrates the value of this process.

Photographs of alcohol for sale in some of the smallest roadside shops prompted some of the student-photographers to note that they hadn't noticed before that alcohol was for sale in so many places. They had, previously, thought of it as only being sold in larger stores, bars and cafes.

In the opinion of most of the student-photographers, beer was not really alcohol, at least not in the same way that whiskey is alcohol.

Subtle gender issues became clearer as a result of the photo based discussions. Quantity and frequency data had suggested that adolescent girls drank alcohol on more occasions than most adults acknowledged. Photographs confirmed this finding. Photographs also showed that most of the drinking done by adolescent girls occurred in the home on special occasions such as on feast days and other celebrations. On the other hand, boys drank in groups, at parties, and in a variety of locations. Subsequent discussion showed that drinking at home with the family in the context of special occasions was not really considered drinking. Drinking was what occurred at bars and parties in locations other than the home. This difference in perception led most adults to underestimate the frequency of drinking among adolescent girls.

Buddhism is the professed religion of 95% of all Thais. The fifth precept in Buddhist teachings appears to forbid the use of alcohol. Students brought pictures of alcohol being sold at the gates to temples, being consumed on temple grounds, being placed in spirit houses (small shrines) and being used in various ways on auspicious Buddhist occasions. One student explained this by saying that almost all Thais were registered at birth as Buddhists, hence the 95%, but that this had little relationship to their actual beliefs and practices. Another said most Thais were Buddhist but not very good Buddhists. Others believed Buddhism could be better judged by the frequency of visits to the temple and the regular giving of donations. This led us to develop a series of questions about religious practices and alcohol expectancies and to discard our original survey question about religious affiliation.

The photographs of expensive brands of alcohol in elaborate gift containers prompted a discussion of the role alcohol played in securing special favors and "buying off" important people.

Typically young people do not readily admit that they do not enjoy the flavor and taste of alcoholic beverages. However, in discussions of their early drinking experiences, usually in the home as part of hospitality rituals or other special occasions, girls in particular spoke about their dislike of the taste of alcohol.

Girls saw boys as using alcohol to show off. The significant number of pictures taken by the male photographers of groups of predominantly young men drinking confirmed the girls' interpretation. However, in the discussions the boys persisted in denying the girls' assertion, claiming that alcohol use was important to male bonding and traditional behavior for young men.

As a result of intensive marketing in urban areas the proportion of women drinking wine appears to be increasing. Photographs confirmed marketing activities and extensive shelf space devoted to wines in food stores. This led to the suggestion that more needed to be known about the expectancies associated with each different type of alcohol (beer, wine, whiskey, etc.) and, especially, the expectancies young women associated with the use of wine.

There is a wide range of traditional beliefs about the way alcohol benefits health and how mixing alcohol with other substances (snake blood, for example) provides special medicinal benefits. Alcohol with additives is used after childbirth to assist recovery, to supplement the masculine libido, to cure aches and pains, and for many other specific medical reasons. We had little knowledge of the extent to which young people knew of these traditional beliefs or indeed what some of the beliefs were. Photographs of medicinal alcohol led to a rich discussion of the medical-related use of alcohol. This again emphasized to us

how expectancies could be specific to each different type of alcohol and reinforced the need to carefully define alcohol on any survey and to explore the expectancies specific to each particular alcohol product.

In addition to the specific comments generated by the photos, the subtle nuances in the discussions gave the researchers a sense of young people's reality and their understanding of alcohol use. In addition the personal nature of the photos allowed discussion of topics otherwise concealed: alcohol's effect on sexuality, families, and family violence, for example.

Discussion

The nonthreatening nature of these discussions, focusing on the photographs of others, appeared to make it easier for students to talk about their own attitudes and behaviors. Arranging for researchers to meet all student-photographers at the same time for the discussions, as opposed to one at a time, increased the amount of information generated. After introductory comments by the photographer, other students entered the discussion with comments, reactions, corroboration and contradiction, which increased the amount and specificity of the information. The first discussion of only a sample of the photographs lasted for two and a half hours — significantly longer than would have been possible without the photographs. Subsequent discussions lasted as long. In each case,

these discussions took place without many of the barriers to discussion and understanding presented by age, culture and language.

Photography was a useful tool to expand our knowledge of a behavior we could not otherwise observe. It helped us overcome the barriers to communication presented by age, culture and language differences. The survey instrument subsequently developed from this activity contained questions much closer to the realities of the young people of interest than would otherwise have been possible. Photography did not guarantee a better survey instrument, but it did provide a much larger pool of concepts to be considered in instrument development.

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