Using Creative Qualitative Methods in Evaluating Gendered Health Promotion Interventions

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Public Health [D26]

Public Health – more specifically Health Promotion – *this is not in the drop-down list*

Intermediate Undergraduate

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Louise is a Reader, working in the centre for Health Promotion Research. Louise teaches on a range of modules within the UK, and overseas including health policy, research, community health and global policy.

She also manages a range of research projects. Louise’s research projects are diverse and include commissioned evaluation work within the voluntary and statutory sector. Her expertise relates to gender-specific interventions. Louise has recently conducted a range of research with vulnerable women, drawing upon feminist and creative approaches to data collection in order to give women voice.

Louise has published several textbooks such as Global Health: A Social Determinants Perspective (2018), Social Inequality (2013), and Contemporary Health Studies: An Introduction (2012 with colleagues). Louise is also the author of the book Researching with Communities (2009) based upon her PhD, as well as numerous journal articles.

Susan Coan

Susan is a Research Officer in the Centre for Health Promotion Research. She works on a wide variety of health-related projects. Current projects include an evaluation of an OT programme for homeless people; an evaluation of an arts centre for people with mental health problems; an evaluation of a project supporting women who have experienced domestic abuse; and a national project exploring the impact community driven approaches are having on reducing health inequalities. Susan has a great deal of experience working with vulnerable groups of people, for example, people with mental health problems, adults with learning disabilities, young children and older adults in general.

Susan is also part of the CommUNIty team. CommUNIty supports the development of sustainable community partnerships between third sector organisations and Leeds Beckett University, with an emphasis on activity that promotes improvements to community health.
and wellbeing. It works by promoting knowledge exchange between communities, community organisations and academics, fostering collaborative research and enterprise and opening up opportunities for participation in higher education. The overarching goal of community is to find new, more effective ways to improve health and reduce health inequalities in communities.

Abstract

This case study considers the use of creative methods that have been used in evaluation research to capture and explore the views of service users receiving support in the context of two gendered interventions. We outline the use of a cake metaphor and a simple writing exercise as creative data collection tools to use with focus group scenarios. The cake metaphor enabled women to describe one thing (the way a group worked) by using the analogy of another (the baking of a cake). The writing activity was a useful tool to report the stories of some women in an exact form, with words that came directly from them. These activities were designed to give service users voice, by more actively engaging them within data-making whilst we explored serious and emotional subject matter. We applied these methods as they are in keeping with the feminist values that underpin our approach to research, and they were viewed positively by our funders. The use of creative methods described here was combined with other traditional methods, not discussed in depth in this case study. The results from the writing activity were captured in photographs as well as a slide show with accompanying narrative. The metaphor work is more traditionally presented with descriptive themes as well as a photograph. We learned to be flexible, and to consider the importance of both purpose and timing in using such tools.
Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to:

1. Understand what qualitative creative methods are
2. Understand how these can be used within the data making process
3. Consider the methodological, ethical and practical benefits of using creative methods within the research process
4. Understand the ways in which creative methods can be used in an integrated approach with more traditional methods such as focus group discussions

Case Study: Project Overview and Context

Research itself is often described as a creative process, but in recent years there have been many developments in methodological approaches in a range of social science disciplines (Denzin and Lincoln 2011), including in Public Health-Health Promotion. There are now many examples of creative research tools, with this research taking place across four key areas: arts-based research, technological approaches to data collection, mixed methods research and transformative areas such as participatory and feminist approaches (Kara 2015). Participatory approaches have many labels and operate by enabling non-researchers to be actively involved and to be heard. Feminist approaches operate with similar principles as well as a political underpinning towards transformation as part of accepted research practice. Qualitative researchers frequently use different tools within their research approaches to engage and involve participants in data collection (Deacon 2000), and creative approaches are arguably an extension of this. Halcomb (2016) notes that there is a range of creative methods available to qualitative researchers, for example, art, dance, poetry, photography or a combination of these.
In this case study, we draw our examples from a transformative context, with our approach underpinned by participatory feminist principles. Here we are working in a gender-specific context (women researching other women) and affording power to the research participants whilst acknowledging ourselves as researchers with power within the process as an inevitability. Such approaches recognize the power dynamics existing between those researching, and the researched. They also attempt to give voice to the realities of participants’ lives (Cross and Warwick-Booth 2015). Whitmore (1994) argues that the ways in which we do research should reflect the issues and values within our areas of interest. In keeping with this position, as evaluators we believe that service user voice is an essential area in which to gather data because it is needed to assess the success of programmes.

One key challenge for researchers doing qualitative fieldwork is trying to address the power imbalance between the researchers and the participants; this is especially noticeable when carrying out research with school aged young women, and vulnerable older women. Creative methods can be used to offer participants different ways of contributing and by presenting the women a range of options in a relaxed atmosphere, they have more control over how they are involved. Dunn and Mellor (2017) argue that the emotional or symbolic aspects of people’s lives may not be accessible to researchers who rely on traditional methods, which require participants to be able to express themselves in very specific ways. Creative methods can make the process more enjoyable and more democratic, allowing people to tell their stories in a way that makes the most sense to them (Wiles et al 2010). Creative research in our view places a higher value on the stories and feedback of research participants (Deacon 2000).

In many instances, research has become a routine which involves standard procedures (Patton 1997). Focus groups are a staple of qualitative research but sometimes it can feel like going through the motions with each group without fully exploring the issues they want to cover or experiences they want to share. The groups can be easily dominated by strong characters or
one issue can drown out other points as it is at the forefront of people’s minds. As researchers, we’re conscious that participants are giving up their time to speak to us so we often dive in without too much warm up to try to get as much from the allocated time-slot as we can. The one size fits all approach means that not all participants have the opportunity to communicate in the way that is most effective or comfortable for them. Innovative approaches, such as those described in this case study open up opportunities for dialogue that might otherwise be missed in standard focus group discussions (Cross and Warwick-Booth 2015.)

**Section summary**
- Approaches to creative research are varied, and can be used in different contexts. Our approach to data gathering took place in a transformative context, and was underpinned by feminist research values.
- Creative research can underpin a more collaborative and engaging approach to data collection, and be used when researchers are aiming to give voice to vulnerable participants.
- Creative research approaches can also be used as a mechanism to try to address the power dynamics that exist within the research process.

**Research Design**

**Overview of the evaluation contexts**

The creative methods described in this case study have been used in two evaluation projects, both of which are gender-specific in that they work with women only. The projects have different aims and objectives and focus their work on differing age-categories of women, with different needs. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the focus of these projects, by way of context.

**Table 1 – The context of the projects in which we used creative tools**

| Project 1 | Project 2 |
Project 1 is embedded in a third sector organisation, which specialises in providing women-only (gender-specific) support. The project aims to reduce distress and the harmful impact of Domestic Violence on women and their children, via a model of trauma-informed working. Support groups and one to one work, are led by facilitators with lived experience.

Project 2 is located within the same third sector organisation. Project 2 aims to support young women and girls aged 13-25 either directly experiencing abuse or witnessing it at home, via a model of education and empowerment. The work takes the form of support groups and one-one work.

We are using a similar approach to both evaluations which places service users at the centre of our data gathering processes, whilst we determine the extent to which the projects have achieved their aims and objectives. To ensure that our evaluation is rigorous we have developed a Theory of Change (TOC) to provide an overall framework for each evaluation (Warwick-Booth et al 2014) and are collecting mixed methods data (quantitative and qualitative). Whilst creative methods can be used in both quantitative and qualitative data collection approaches, our case study illustrates examples drawn from the qualitative paradigm only.

**Creative Tools**

The creative tools that we designed were both used during focus group discussions. The tools that we used, and the data that we produced are outlined in detail in tables 2 and 3.

**Table 2 – The creative tools used and the resulting data (project 1)**

| Example 1 – The Cake Metaphor (used in project 1) |  |
The approach used

Participants were asked to think about the project as a cake recipe, to help them to illustrate the essential elements of the service by representing them as ingredients, as well as those that were added extras, in their opinions.

Pictures of suggested ‘ingredients’ of what makes the service work were prepared by the researchers, as well as themes relating to different components of the project to prompt the group if necessary. The themes were taken from previous one to one interviews with service users. Images of cake ingredients were provided, such as eggs, sugar, flour and butter. The images also included a bowl and mixing equipment. The full range of pictures used are shown in the image below.

10 service users participated in this focus group discussion.

The use of metaphors within qualitative research allows research participants to describe one thing (the way in which a group works), by using an analogy of another (a cake). Nind and Vinha (2016) outline the use of a cake metaphor within focus groups in their study exploring the nature of inclusive research. We drew on this paper to inform our own research design in project 1. More generally, Cade (1982) notes that when researchers ask participants to describe one thing using a metaphor, they have the freedom to use their own creativity and experiences in a reflective way. There are numerous metaphors that can be used for example, songs, movies, book characters, household objects as well as food (Deacon 2000).

Table 3 – The creative tools used and the resulting data (project 2)

| Example 2 – Starter Cards (used in project 2) | The approach used |
The participants were given 2 cards with statements on that they were asked to complete. This activity was aiming to give the participants some quiet reflection time at the start of the focus group as a mechanism to break the ice. The statements chosen were also intended to draw out some of the impact of the project in relation to how the young women feel about themselves, their situations and others who have similar experiences.

The young women were invited to share their statements at the start of the focus group, before being asked questions using a semi-structured schedule. The starter card statements are illustrated below.

2 focus groups were conducted using this approach to data collection.

Deacon (2000) argues that there are many writing activities that qualitative researchers can use to elicit information from participants, including using incomplete prompts such as the beginning of sentences related to the topic of study. Writing is one way in which the stories of participants can be told in an exact form, with the words coming directly from those who have written them down. This method does of course rely upon participants to be both able and willing to write things down.

**Section summary**
• We used creative methods in our evaluation of women-only projects to place service-users at the centre of our data gathering, and to give them voice. Both activities were used within the context of a focus group discussion.
• One creative approach was based upon the use of a food metaphor, where the group that service users attended was likened to the ingredients needed to bake a cake.
• The second data gathering approach used a writing activity to elicit information from participants, encouraging them to finish incomplete sentences in their own words.

Research Practicalities

Recruitment
Participants in the research were recruited by the project staff involved in the delivery of both interventions. In evaluation approaches, researchers rely upon professionals to supply them with details of service-users who they can contact, and then ask to participate in the research. In this instance, both projects are delivered as group work sessions, with women attending at specified days and times on a weekly basis. Given this, our evaluation methodology included focus group discussions as a tool to use within the usual allocated project delivery time.

Ethics
Both evaluations received ethical approval through Leeds Beckett University ethics procedures. To ensure ethical rigour written consent was obtained from all participants prior to women attending the group, as well as at the start of each focus group activity. As evaluators, we allowed time at the start of our data gathering for women to ask questions, and for us to explain our approach, confidentiality, anonymity, data storage and the right to withdraw. We guaranteed that no personal identifying information would be used in the reporting of our findings, and that we had secure information management through password protected university systems for data storage. We also provided a deadline for the withdrawal
of participation which allowed the women two weeks after the focus groups to contact us, should they decide that they no longer wanted to participate (none did). We explained the need to be specific because once we started to analyse and present findings, withdrawal is not logistically possible. Consent was re-confirmed throughout the activities and the women made choices about what they wanted to do without pressure from the researchers.

**Data analysis**

Data collected through the use of creative methods can be analysed in the same ways as data collected through other means. As researchers, we created visual products and some recorded content from the activities that we used, all of which have been shared with participants and our commissioners. We also used quotes from participants and have presented these alongside our narrative of the cake metaphor as a tangible result of our data gathering. The quotes used on the starter cards in project 2 are written in the exact words of the research participants and therefore can be used as they are, as well as compared to the data we gathered later on in the more structured and traditional focus group discussion.

**Section summary**

- Recruitment to our evaluation was supported by professionals involved in the delivery of each project.
- Ethical considerations always apply in every research project, and these can require on-going negotiation with the use of more creative data gathering approaches.
- Data analysis using these methods is similar to traditional qualitative approaches; we produced products that demonstrated participant voice through quotations in written and verbal forms. We also produced photographs and a slide show as additional products.

**Method in Action**

In terms of Project 1, the researchers had not used the cake metaphor activity before and did not know how well the activity would be received. The subject matter the group deals with is
very serious and the researchers were conscious that this was a very light-hearted approach. The focus was on establishing the elements of a successful support group working in that area, not on the circumstances that brought the women to that service. The activity was used as an icebreaker before the start of the semi-structured focus group, and the women did engage fully with the idea, with most of the group providing input. Traditional icebreakers usually encompass tasks to welcome people and enable them to interact. This was the purpose of our ice-breaker but our activity also had a secondary aim of data gathering in this instance, so was part of the data collection. For the metaphor activity, we were looking for a consensus, welcoming all views with plenty of space to incorporate them, but it is a group task and therefore works best when everyone is at ease when the facilitators have built up trust.

In comparison, the starter cards used in project 2 were once again used with a dual purpose, of ice-breaking and data collection. We felt that they were appropriate as an icebreaker as they allow individuals to think about their own experience before the discussion, meaning that everyone’s voice is heard, and one opinion is not lost in a group consensus. The comments written on the cards, are also insightful data. In this instance, despite the evaluation process being independent from the service, the group facilitators (our commissioners) were keen to disseminate outputs from our usage of creative methods to promote the service and share the young women’s experiences. Potential activities for the focus groups had already been discussed with the facilitators to gauge what the young women would be most receptive to. The approach of the weekly group work (the basis of this intervention) incorporates creative activities to help the women to communicate difficult experiences and promote wellbeing, so our methods were in keeping with this tradition, and seen as appropriate to use in the evaluation. However, the facilitators wanted one output from the data collection to be a video for wider sharing on the host organisation’s website and
social media sites. Ethically, the use of film raises additional challenges to the anonymity of participants. We discussed our concerns with the facilitators who suggested filming from the back or using silhouettes. This did not resolve the issues of anonymity and was unlikely to result in a very interesting video! We decided to attend the focus group with a range of activities and options and to take our lead from the young women, in keeping with feminist principles and to help them to share what they chose, how they chose. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the young women were not comfortable with being filmed, reflecting our concerns as researchers.

**Section summary**

- As a researcher, it is not possible to know what type of data will be produced, and if creative activities will ‘work’ in practice, therefore it is wise to have alternative plans.
- In using creative methods, researchers need to be prepared for participants reactions to their plans for data collection. We were not sure how our ideas would be received and so went to the data collection with a flexible plan, as well as a ‘traditional’ semi-structured interview schedule, which we did use in all instances.
- If creative research approaches are to include meaningful engagement and a more co-produced data gathering process, researchers need too to be prepared to be flexible, for example, not filming when this is requested given ethical requirements linked to anonymity.

**Practical Lessons Learned**

When we used the metaphor activity in project 1, as the group were not warmed up, the researchers had to offer suggested example themes early in the activity to give the women some ideas of where to start and what was being asked. They added to the themes and expanded on them but would perhaps have been more forthcoming with ideas at the end of the focus group discussion. In addition, in this instance we did not record the creation of the cake recipe as it occurred, in an effort to encourage the participants to feel at ease but instead made some notes, perhaps missing some data as an inevitable consequence. We started recording once we began the more semi-structured, traditional focus group discussion,
following the activity. In future, there could be an argument for building up some rapport with the group during the focus group discussion and then talking about the metaphor at the end when they have reflected on the service. The concept could be introduced at the beginning and then revisited at the end. Therefore, we learned the importance of considering timings when using creative methods, to allow participants space for reflection. Researchers need to allow adequate time for rapport and trust to be established.

In comparison, the starter cards used in project 2 worked well, and are appropriate as an icebreaker as they allowed the women time to think about their own experience before we commenced the more traditional focus group discussion, meaning that everyone’s voice was heard and that single opinions are not lost in a group consensus. Researchers should think about the aims of their project when using all methods, including creative methods. For example, can the tools address the purpose of the research, and do they meet with commissioner/funder requirements and expectations?

Whilst we had the support of our funders in using creative tools (they use them in their own practice within the group delivery sessions), debate still occurred in relation to the final products within project 2: to film or not to film? Whilst we are experienced at data collecting within gendered contexts, and one researcher had engaged with training in creative methods, our skill sets are limited in terms of practically editing and producing films. Therefore, we feel that it important to work within your own skill set when applying creative methods in practice.

**Section summary**

- When using creative methods in the context of a focus group discussion, we will in future think about the point in time at which we use them. Some creative tools can be useful ice-breakers whereas others are less so. More detailed activities such as metaphorical work need trust to have been established, and for participants to feel at ease.
• All research methods and tools (creative or more traditional) need to be considered in relation to how they meet the aims of each project, alongside how they fit with funder expectations and standards.
• Researchers employing creative methods should pay attention to their own skill sets and competencies, considering these in terms of all components of the research process, from design, through to final products.

Conclusion

Our experience of using creative tools in data gathering has been positive so far, and we are keen to try other tools to compare how these work within evaluation contexts. We were able to produce useful data, which involved service users and to give them voice. Table 4 illustrates the results from using the creative tools within each project evaluation. We used ice-breaker tasks with the dual purpose of developing interaction and producing data and embedded these within a more traditional focus group approach. The additional data that we garnered from the use of a semi-structured focus group schedule is not included.

Table 4 – Results from using creative tools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data produced – project 1</th>
<th>Data produced – project 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The bowl was described metaphorically as the mechanism for holding the essential ingredients together.</td>
<td>Several young women were happy to be audio recorded reading out each other’s statements in one group. University staff members read out statements from a second group in which the same approach to data collection was used, because participants did not want to be recorded. A slideshow of the statements was then created with the audio playing over it. An example of a completed starter card is provided below.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other essential ingredients that the cake could not be made without included:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Group rules (important in relation to both trust and safety)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Childcare provision (crèche available at the location where the group is held)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Trust – creating the confidence to attend, and participate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Women in the same position were viewed as the eggs, in the sense that “they hold it together”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Safety was discussed as being important, in “mixing the group together”

Perceiving the other group members as friendly and the workers as non-judgemental

Advice and help, and being able to speak to a worker outside of the group was discussed as an enabler of attendance and engagement

The baking tin was described as quiet space, whilst the oven was seen as ‘support’ to describe the sense of the mechanisms for how the cake was being baked.

The photograph below illustrates the order in which the women placed the ingredients, and where they added labels as part of the development of the metaphor.

Section summary

- Creative tools are useful within evaluation research to illustrate service user voice in data reporting.
- Creative methods can be used to provide commissioners with ‘different’ outputs, rather than a traditional report.
We used creative tools alongside more traditional methods (a semi-structured focus group), providing us with more in-depth results.

Classroom Discussion Questions

1. In which research situations do you think creative data collection tools can be used? Might some situations lend themselves more easily to such approaches?

2. Why would you consider using creative methods in your own proposed research? Consider the benefits and disadvantages of such approaches with specific reference to your own research project.

3. Revisit the examples that we have provided in this case study. Now working in small groups, plan a qualitative creative data collection approach which could be used to gather views of people who have taken part in a 12-week behavior change intervention, which aimed to support them in improving their lifestyle choices. For example, to increase their intake of fresh fruit and vegetables, as well as their levels of physical activity.

Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

Correct answer highlighted in red

1. Creative research methods are argued to be useful specifically because they:
   a. Actively involve and engage participants within the data collection, and can give voice to more vulnerable groups
   b. Are part of a traditional approach that researchers can simply repeat and so go through the motions
   c. Are a one-size fits all approach where researchers don’t need to worry about the diverse ways in which participants might want to communicate

2. Creative research tools are broad in scope because they
a. Are based on research, which in itself is creative irrespective of what tools are used

b. Can include art, dance, poetry, metaphors, photography and activities based upon writing, and be used in a range of contexts

c. Are a rigorous way to gather data without needing the feedback of research participants

3. When conducting any research project, ethical guidelines are needed. With specific reference to creative research approaches, ethical requirements include:

a. Only protecting the anonymity of participants

b. Ensuring that informed consent is achieved at a single point of the research process

c. The consideration of how the method can address power imbalances, the re-confirming of consent at various points in time, as well as listening to the views of participants in relation to the ‘end’ research products

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

Further Reading

   Policy Press, Bristol.


**Web Resources**

1. Creativity Research Journal, hosted by Taylor and Francis -  
   [https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/hcrj20/current](https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/hcrj20/current)

2. National Centre for Research Methods - [https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/](https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/) - see the section on the web-site which details ‘Creative research methods: the story so far’.

3. YouTube. Creative Methods Online Course, which includes a range of videocasts:  
   a. Creative Research Methods, Dr Helen Kara  
      ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PgWTVL92RM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PgWTVL92RM))  
   b. Creative Research Methods - Arts based methods  
      ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpnexrLZBT4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpnexrLZBT4))  
   c. Creative Research Methods - Technology and mixed methods research  
      ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vXUJQecVA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vXUJQecVA))

**References**


Warwick-Booth, L et al. (2014) ‘Using the theory of change to support an evaluation of a health promotion initiative’ *Sage Methodology Case Study* Online available at http://srmo.sagepub.com/cases
