SAGE Research Methods Foundations

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Metadata Sheet

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Using comics as a research method

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Although the medium of comics has a long history, its use as method in research is still in its early stages. This entry begins by outlining the definition and scope of comics. Next, it explores how and why comics might be used within social research. It then discusses potential ethical and practical challenges. Finally, the entry provides practical suggestions to support the use of comics as a research method. This involves making connections with other visual research methods as well as exploring specific affordances of the comics medium.

Definitions and scope of comics

Whereas 'a comic' may have persistent associations with humour; cartoon-style artwork and narrative; and weekly print publication schedules, this is but part of the comics medium. As a medium, comics has subdivisions including, but not limited to, web comics, graphic novels, manga, editorial cartoon, political cartoons and small press. These formats each have their own criteria meaningful to some creators and users, yet disputed by others. Quick doodled comics shared online or photocopied are part of the comics industry, as are mass market print and digital publications that, as transmedia properties, have spawned films and TV series. This opens vast possibilities for creative choices and target audiences, and results in grammatically correct but somewhat awkward phrasing: *comics is* a medium (an abstract noun), but individual *comics are* also specific cultural products (a concrete noun).

Two key features of the medium, realised in whatever format a comics creator chooses to use, are interdependence and sequentiality. First, the interdependence of words and pictures makes comics an inherently multimodal medium: the communicative weight in comics is shared across both text and image. This multimodality differs from illustrated books in which the story stands alone (augmented by illustrations). Second, the use of sequence in establishing a reading order, as seen in a series of comic panels, typically box-like frames used to present a chronology of events. Playing with the conventions of sequencing can intentionally obscure who is speaking or where they are located, for example, through judicious use of close-up details, silhouettes or unfeasibly vast landscapes. The way

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in which a sequence of panels is simultaneously visible on a page or screen is a key feature of comics; this differs from animation or film, in which each cell is only visible for a fraction of a second. The overall stability of a comics page seen in peripheral vision can help a reader anticipate narrative development, for example, through variations in colour or panel layout that change an established sequence. Turning the pages of a book, or clicking/scrolling on a webpage, can take this further still.

Comics creation as research

The focus of this entry is on using comics as a method at different stages of a range of empirical research processes. This is differentiated from the many examples of using comics to communicate the outputs of research or public information campaigns (Graham, 2011), though with appropriate ethical consideration comics can indeed be used as part of research dissemination to academic and non-academic audiences.

The uses of comics as part of a research process include:

- comics-form documents (information sheet, debrief sheet, questionnaire)
- elicitation (interview based on comic drawn by participant)
- retelling interview transcripts (creating a comic based on interview with participant)
- sequencing events (reordering pre-made panels)
- completing comics (adding text to images, or suggesting ways a sequence might continue)
- multiple readings of a given comic (discussing different interpretations).

The term 'comics creator' is used to encompass writing and drawing as intertwined processes, whether carried out by an individual or by a team subdivided by specialist roles. There is no single definitive comics creation process, but a common approach in the development of a coherent comic is as follows:

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- planning (initial scribbled words and pictures to capture and develop ideas)
- thumbnails (rough sketches to plan a sequence of events and layout of key panels within that sequence)
- pencils (erasable guidelines of everything on a page)
- ink (final line art)
- colour and lettering (adding to the final line art to create a finished page).

Some comics creators develop words and pictures as inseparable parts of telling a story, whereas others adapt a written script into a drawn page or add words to a series of images. This can be achieved with traditional media (pen and paper; printmaking techniques), digital drawing tools, or apps and digital tools that combine pre-made elements with photographs or drawings. Practitioner-led 'how to' books useful insights (see further readings).

Whereas comics made as creative practice typically emphasise aesthetic considerations of 'good' artwork and writing, participative research approaches focus on expressing and sharing people's own voices in whatever style is meaningful to them. Stick figures and intentionally simplistic drawing styles can prioritise clarity of communication over subjective ideas of artistic beauty (Mendonça, 2016). In this way comics has shared ground with zine making, self-published magazines typically with an activist intent and particularly used in feminist approaches to research with an emphasis on empowering participants to create and share their own publications (Feigenbaum, 2013).

Reasons for using comics in research

Using comics to mediate conversations between participants and researchers could be assumed to imply a focus on working with children and young people, and this is indeed a strength (e.g. Bailey, 2016). However, comics' communication through the use of visual as well as written languages - as inherent in the medium, not a remedial educational device - can have benefits when working with adults with low literacy levels or speakers of other

languages. It can also be of wider relevance in helping participants to discuss concepts that are difficult, or even traumatic, to relate through words alone (McNicol, 2019). Despite these advantages, using comics does not automatically make research more inclusive. For instance, while the use of images alongside text can help some readers, others may find this disorienting or difficult to skim read. Visual accessibility must also be considered particularly with reference to reading order, font and colour palette.

Comics versions of traditional research instruments can help to target specific populations. For example, making both a questionnaire and a debrief sheet in comics form could help in fieldwork with comics convention attendees (Wysocki, 2018). Comics-form instruments offer advantages for data collection in settings where a written questionnaire may be considered boring or otherwise unsuitable, with parallels to the use of visual Likert scale instruments for fieldwork with pre- or non-literate children. However, these instruments may take longer to create than text-only versions.

Comics created as part of ethnographic, or autoethnographic, research offer advantages including: the development of imaginative and collaborative approaches to ethnography; making aspects of fieldwork visible; and engaging wider audiences in research (Dragone, 2016). In particular, the uses of comics in healthcare (Czerwiec et al., 2015) to communicate experiences of illness can share powerful narratives, though with caution around addressing anonymity as even simplistic drawings can convey rich personal information.

Working with comics creators, or as researcher-practitioner

Technical skill in writing and drawing is not a prerequisite for making comics. Researchers using comics as a method have a choice: to work in collaboration with an

experienced comics creator (artist-writer), or to create comics within their own skill levels as a researcher-practitioner. Both options have implications for the design of the research and its practical implementation.

Working in partnership with a comics creator has impacts on the research beyond artistic instruction or technical advice. The creative practitioner's own understandings and assumptions become part of the process, making it essential that they understand and subscribe to the ethos of the research and indeed contribute their own insights. It is essential that the researcher(s) and practitioner(s) discuss the project together including the context, key underpinning theories and expectations of the process. Debriefing after each session can help keep processes on track. Not every creative practitioner will be a suitable collaborator for a given research project. Whilst some research requires a collaboration more akin to a standard artist commission (e.g. producing a piece of artwork in response to data), other work may have very different demands such as the ability to manage groups and develop ongoing relationships with communities. It is therefore important to match not only artistic skills, but also communication skills and experience of working with particular communities, to the needs of each project.

Working as a researcher-practitioner can involve addressing similar tensions within oneself. Being as critical in the aesthetics and storytelling of one's work as in one's research approach is a significant undertaking. Making and editing work can be distinct cognitive processes, particularly when visual as well as verbal language is used, and whilst this can ultimately add to the richness of work it may be a rollercoaster process. Until comics becomes more widely embedded as a research method, researcher-practitioners need to be prepared to justify both the content and the form of their work, remembering that making edits can involve restructuring and redrawing that takes longer than for equivalent written

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work.

Ethical considerations

Using comics as a research method can present specific ethical issues. We focus here on concerns around the representation of participants and the ways in which comics are analysed.

Representation of participants

There is often a disparity between researchers whose names are on publications and who accept credit for, and critique of, their work whilst the names and identities of their participants are obscured. The representation of participants goes far beyond ensuring a consistent visual style, and can be particularly problematic as ethical and aesthetic issues are intertwined. Pixellation has been used to attempt anonymity of participants, though with variable results; furthermore, it is not always appreciated by those being 'protected' given connotations of criminality and victimhood implicit in the use of this technique in the media (Wiles et al, 2008). The use of comics affords participants options to decide how they wish to be depicted, including: drawings (realistic or abstract), stock photographs, and participants' photographs (perhaps altered using digital filters, silhouette or collage). If direct representations of participants are included in a comic, it may well be appropriate to offer participants sight or approval of the draft comic with the opportunity to discuss changes. If fictionalised characters are used, due attention should be given to race, gender, age, dis/ability and myriad other visible signs of difference: discussing who is included in a generic crowd scene can draw attention to assumptions that can go unsaid in written work.

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Reading and analysis of comics

The use of comics, or indeed any visual element in research, can lead to an assumption that pictures are self-evident and need no further elaboration, framing or analysis. In the majority of instances, this is far from the case. Stuart Hall (1980) unpacked this as encoding and decoding: when creators and readers have sufficiently similar frames of reference this transfer of meaning can be seamless, but when they have different frames of reference there is potential for miscommunication.

Analysing comics requires a substantial degree of reader (or researcher) participation. As Thierry Groensteen (2007, 10) describes, a comic is "a story that is full of holes": the panels in a comic can be seen as "visual fragments" (ibid), often separated by empty gutters. Key to the analysis of comics, therefore, is the notion of gaps: an absence that the reader must themselves fill in order to make sense of the text. Thus, there is no single correct reading of a comic, but rather a range of more or less valid interpretations.

Practical challenges

Using comics as a research method can present a number of practical challenges. The two most common are: managing stakeholder expectations and time considerations.

Funders and other stakeholders may have particular expectations of how a finished comic will look. Even when stakeholders move beyond a superficial association of comics with humour, they may raise aesthetic expectations in terms of what they consider 'good' artwork and writing. In some projects, outputs demand high production values that may well involve collaboration with experienced comics creators to produce outputs that either include

participants' own comics, or treat these as rough thumbnails to be redrawn by a professional artist. Other projects may, however, emphasise the expression and sharing of participants' own voices in whatever style is meaningful to them, which could involve outputs that are aesthetically unrefined but emotionally powerful.

It may also be necessary to manage participants' expectations. Participants may initially associate comics with their own childhood reading. If they are unfamiliar with seeing or reading comics about serious topics, the idea that the medium can be used to address more complex issues can be perplexing. Sharing examples of comics with complex themes and emphasising the breadth of the medium can help here.

Making and using comics can be more time consuming than more traditional research methods, for example, the time taken to design comics-based research instruments, or working with participants to develop their skills and confidence to make their own comics. The decision to use comics should therefore be considered integral to the research not simply an add-on.

Practical advice

This entry concludes with some practical advice on the use of comics as a research method.

Developing participants' confidence: Some researchers have reported positive responses when asking participants to draw, especially once participants developed a level of trust with the researcher. However, others have found that the expectation of drawing can deter participants. Making comics as a research method is about using multimodality and sequence to communicate ideas. Retaining a focus on this can help acknowledge and move

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beyond any embarrassment or lack of confidence in participants' (and researchers') artistic knowledge and skills. An activity as simple as looking at published comics can give participants confidence in their own drawing skills as they realise that, in a comic, drawings do not have to be perfect. The aim is not to make participants expert comics creators, but to enable them draw and write well enough to communicate their ideas, without mistaking this for technical instruction in art and writing.

Offering alternatives: Providing options, such as the use of photographs as well as drawings, can help overcome participants' reluctance to draw or feelings of being limited by their artistic skills. Encouraging participants to work in pairs or small groups can emphasise communication, taking the focus away from individual skill. Working with experienced comics creators can offer further alternatives: a writer may clarify the structure of a narrative, or an artist could sketch what a participant describes.

Establishing trust: The circumstances under which participants are asked to create comics can affect their willingness to do so. If the atmosphere is relaxed, requests to draw may find a more willing response. Quite reasonably, participants can be reluctant to accept the word of the facilitator that a workshop is in fact a 'safe space' and will need to establish this for themselves (McMillan & McNicol, 2019). To help create trust, the researcher may choose to make themselves vulnerable in some way: by demonstrating their own naive drawing skills; drawing with their non-dominant hand; or speaking about their own personal connection to the issue at stake.

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