

## Engaging adolescent participants in academic research: the use of photo-elicitation interviews to evaluate school-based outdoor education programmes

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Running head: ENGAGING ADOLESCENTS IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH

Engaging adolescent participants in academic research: The use of photo-elicitation  
interviews to evaluate school-based outdoor education programmes

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### Abstract

This paper examines the use of photo-elicitation interviews as a qualitative research method when studying aspects of adolescent behaviour. In particular, it describes and evaluates the use of photo-elicitation interviews to investigate the outdoor education experiences of a group of 34 (12 male, 22 female) New Zealand secondary school students (aged 14-15 years old) who attended a school-based outdoor education programme, referred to throughout as 'school camp'. Results indicate that the use of cameras, and hence photographs, are attractive features of the technique which render it suitable for engaging young people in academic research and exploring social experiences. While the inclusion of cameras also presents some methodological limitations and ethical considerations, photo-elicitation interviewing is a useful addition to the suite of qualitative research methods employed in outdoor education research.

**Keywords:** Photo-elicitation interviews, qualitative research methods, outdoor education, student experiences, school-based outdoor education programmes

## *Introduction*

Photo-elicitation interviewing is a technique which is gaining popularity with researchers who conduct studies involving children and young people (see, for example, Castonguay & Jutras, 2009; Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005; Dean, 2007; Mitchell, Kearns, & Collins, 2006). In comparison to the more traditional, words-alone interview technique, photo-elicitation interviews make use of photographs (or other tangible images) to stimulate a conversation between the participant and the researcher (Banks, 2001; Collier Jr & Collier, 1986; Harper, 2002). Although using images in research in this way is not new, the photo-elicitation interview technique has not, to our knowledge, been used previously in an outdoor education context involving adolescents.<sup>1,2</sup>

In this paper, we examine the strengths and weaknesses of using a photo-elicitation interview method by reflecting on a study which explored students' experiences of a residential outdoor education programme known as 'school camp'; we also present recommendations for future use of the method in such a context. The article consists of four sections. In the first, we develop the argument for applying the photo-elicitation interview technique in an outdoor education context. In section two, we present an overview of how we conducted our study. In the third section, we reflect on the use of this method when working with adolescents and its suitability for investigating outdoor education experiences. Finally, in section four, we discuss future directions for outdoor education research based on our own experience.

## *Selecting the photo-elicitation interview method*

Our rationale for selecting the photo-elicitation interview method was based on two central premises. First, we needed a method that was flexible and open enough for the investigation of the somewhat nebulous phenomenon of 'experience'. Second, our data

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collection technique needed to work well with adolescents. As will be shown, photo-elicitation interviewing appeared to meet both these requirements.

## CAPTURING OUTDOOR EDUCATION EXPERIENCES

The concept of ‘experience’ is integral to the philosophy and practice of outdoor education; surprisingly, though, few researchers have attempted its definition (Bell, 1993; Payne, 2002; Zink, 2004 are exceptions). Payne (2002) and Fox (2008a) suggested that this may be because what constitutes ‘experience’ and the meaning of ‘experience’ are implicitly assumed within the outdoor education field. Certainly, this would appear to be the case, given the lack of academic critique of the term. Researchers and practitioners, however, may *not* have a shared understanding of what ‘experience’ means. These issues are also evident in the broader field of experiential education from which much outdoor education philosophy is drawn (see Fox 2008a; 2008b; Roberts 2008; Seaman 2008).<sup>3</sup> Given that the initial objective of this study was to investigate the ways in which students experience school camp, we needed to define the term and identify suitable methods for gaining an understanding of it.

The confusion is not limited to the outdoor education literature, of course. On the one hand, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* defines experience broadly as ‘direct observational knowledge of the world’ (Handerich, 2005: 60). The *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, on the other hand, defines experience to ‘a conscious event: an event that is lived through, or undergone, as opposed to one that is imagined or thought about’ and ‘the present contents of consciousness’ (VandenBos, 2007: 354).

Neill’s (2004: para. 1-3, emphasis in original) definition of experience adopts a slightly more process-orientated perspective. ‘*Experience* refers to the nature of the events someone or something has undergone. Experience is what is happening to us all the time – as long as we *exist*. [It]...refers to the subjective nature of one’s current existence...[and] to the accumulated product (or residue) of past experiences.’ Thus, experience can be taken to

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indicate content or process, and may or may not involve a beginning and end, however vaguely defined.

Importantly, Neill's definition incorporates an understanding that experience is subjective; it is interpretive. We agree that, for most purposes in the social sciences, interpretations carry greater predictive value for behaviour than accurate or consensual versions of reality. In addition, pragmatic considerations demand that research must be temporally bounded; we can neither look at everything all at once, nor even simple things all the time.

In keeping with this understanding, the concept of experience as used in this paper refers to an individual's subjective, recollected interpretations and perceptions of a specific time or event. This simple definition incorporates the aspect of subjectivity inherent in personal experience, acknowledges the idea that such memories are to greater and lesser extents malleable, but still allows the endpoints necessary to constitute a unit of analysis. In this study, the single, time-bounded event we are examining is that of a school camp.

Defining experience in this way has implications for the types of data collection techniques employed. Carlsson (2001) has suggested that the photo-elicitation interview method is particularly apt for studies of experience. We agree with this suggestion for the reasons given immediately below.

Inasmuch as experience is subjective, any research investigating the experience of an event or events requires a technique which encourages participants to report their own recollections. These include recollections which they feel the researcher wishes to hear as well as those which they have incorporated from others' comments after the event. Encouraging participants to take their own photographs is one way that this might be achieved. There are two principal reasons for this. First, control of the data production is relinquished to the participant. This, in turn, drives the course and content of any subsequent

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interview. Second, as Carlsson (2001: 130) has stated 'This 'freedom' for the participants to choose places, objectives and motives of the photos increases the opportunity for them to express their own conception of, and relation to, the surrounding world. In short, implicit in every photo there are several personal decisions.' That is, photographs 'portray the subjective reality perceived...by the photographer' (Martin & Martin, 2004: 19). Using participants' photographs to understand their experiences, however, is only valid if they are given an opportunity to explain them (Carlsson, 2001). Without the photographer's interpretation, the meaning of the photograph cannot be fully understood (Kearney & Hyle, 2004); consequently, the photograph loses an enormous amount of value as data. This approach is consistent with auteur theory, the central premise of which is that a photographer's interpretation of their photograph is often different to the meaning ascribed by an audience (Rose, 2007).

Having participants interpret their photographs embeds the photographs and contextualises the images, thus providing insight into important people, places and things attached to the event. It gives the researcher access to the perspective of the participant (Dodman, 2003; Harper, 2002). It also points to those aspects of the event which the participant, at the time, felt worthy of recording for *future* reminiscences (Loeffler, 2004b). Although recollecting past experiences in the present can be achieved in a number of other ways (for example, traditional words-alone interviews or focus groups), the inclusion of visual 'mnemonics', such as photographs, in the research process might go some way toward re-capturing the immediacy of the experience lost in other techniques. In addition, of course, the presence of participants' photographs can stimulate and sharpen participants' memories (Loeffler, 2005).

In sum, then, the argument that photo-elicitation interviewing is appropriate for investigating experiences is grounded in its potential to collect rich data which taps into the

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perspective of the participant close to the time of the experience. The second part of our 'principal reason' for choosing the photo-elicitation interview method was the need to identify a method that worked well with adolescent participants.

Although qualitative research methods are often employed by researchers investigating the outdoor education experiences of youths (see, for example, Bialeschki, Krehbiel, & Henderson, 2002; Davidson, 2001; Garst, Scheider, & Baker, 2001; Zink, 2005), the application of photo-elicitation interviewing is less common. A literature search revealed only one other photo-elicitation interview study using participant-generated photographs in an outdoor education context (see Loeffler, 2004a; 2004b; 2005).<sup>2</sup> Yet, this method has been used successfully in a number of studies investigating a range of aspects associated with the lives of children and young people. The studies include inner-city childhood (Clark-Ibanez, 2004); physical activity (Darbyshire et al., 2005); the experiences of Bosnian refugee children in Canada (Berman, Ford-Gilboe, Moutrey & Cekic, 2001); perceptions of school or university environments (Damico, 1985; Douglas, 1998); service and education provision for Traveller/Gypsy children (Dean, 2007); children's experiences of public spaces (Castonguay & Jutras, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2006); and children's perceptions of river environments (Tunstall, Tapsell & House, 2004).

Given the positive reports regarding the use of photo-elicitation interviews when working with children or young people, we chose this method for our study of the school camp experience. We were also concerned to evaluate its usefulness in the outdoor education context with a view to commenting on the value of the method to other researchers in the same and allied fields. Before offering our reflections on the use of this method, we present an overview of the manner in which we conducted our study.



### *Project overview*

The study was designed to explore students' experiences of a school-based outdoor education programme. While previous photo-elicitation studies involving children and young people have been successful, the implications of providing cameras to adolescent participants, who were about to attend a residential outdoor education programme, was largely unknown at the beginning of the research.

### PARTICIPANTS

Thirty-four secondary school students who attended a residential outdoor education programme as part of their formal schooling volunteered to participate in this study. Students were aged 14-15 years old; 22 were female and 12 were male.<sup>4</sup> Students attended one of two suburban schools in the Canterbury region of New Zealand: one a girls' school, the other a co-educational school. The camps were both held at the end of the New Zealand school year (Nov/Dec 2007). Both schools are categorised as 'state integrated',<sup>5</sup> and as such have a 'special character' whereby the schools hold Christian values and affiliations. The decile rating of both schools was 9.<sup>6</sup>

In co-operation with school staff, the study was introduced to the students and a dual parental/student consent process suited to each school was implemented. At the girls' school, information sheets and consent forms were distributed via students' teachers; at the co-educational school, the lead researcher distributed these items following a year-group assembly.

Twenty-eight consent forms were returned from the ninety-nine which were distributed at the co-educational school; twelve male and sixteen female (response rate: 28.3%). Due to the method of distribution, it is not known exactly how many students received information sheets and consent forms at the girls' school, but 12 were returned. To ensure the greatest diversity of school camp experiences as possible, all students from the

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girls' school were included in the study as were the 12 male students who volunteered.

Owing to resource constraints, however, only 34 students could be accommodated in the study; thus 6 of the 16 females from the co-educational school were randomly identified and removed from the sample.

Given the self-selected nature of the sample, the students in our study were clearly a motivated sample, receptive to the idea of using cameras to take photographs during their time at school camp. In this respect, they may differ from other students of a similar age, even those who attended the same camps.

### 'SCHOOL CAMP' – THE OUTDOOR EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

All participants attended a three-day, residential, outdoor education programme and, in both schools, the accepted terminology to describe these programmes was 'school camp'. While staff from both schools organised the camps, they outsourced the programme development and provision of technical outdoor activities to two different outdoor education centres in Canterbury, New Zealand. Both camps were compulsory for students to attend (students required formal school permission *not* to do so) and, although the suite of outdoor activities was not the same across both school camps, all students participated in a range of water and land-based activities. These activities included ropes courses, kayaking, abseiling, coastering (an expedition-type activity along the coastline), orienteering or navigation, river crossing, bush walking, and overnight camping.

### PROCEDURE

The study involved two phases: use of cameras (Phase 1); and follow-up interviews (Phase 2). For Phase 1, project briefings with selected students took place at each school during the week prior to the camp. The lead researcher explained the project and informed the students about the photo-elicitation interview process. Students were asked to take a group of photographs which showed '... what school camp was like for them'. To ensure that the

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photographs reflected, as much as possible, the students' own responses, no specific directive was given regarding the content of students' photographs. They were, however, encouraged to consider what they might take photographs of and also consider 'pacing' their photographs, so as not to miss something important that might happen later in the camp. It was also emphasised that apart from taking some photographs at camp that could be used in the subsequent interview, there were no expectations as to what sort of photographs would be produced.

This lack of direction and expectation was potentially quite confusing, inasmuch as it was different from the prescribed and adult-directed work which students are usually required to complete as part of their formal education in New Zealand schools. Thus, participants were provided with the following hypothetical scenario to help them understand what they were to do.

Pretend you are going to post the series of photographs you take on your personal webpage (for example, Bebo, MySpace or Facebook), so you can show your friends what your time at school camp was like for you. I am interested in what school camp was like from your point of view. These photographs may be of anything, as long as they show something about what school camp is like for you (adapted from Damico, 1985).

Ethical considerations regarding the responsibility acquired by taking a camera to camp, and the appropriate use of the camera, were addressed in the pre-camp briefings. The central principle discussed with students was that they should only take photographs of other people if they would be comfortable being similarly photographed. Technical use and care of the cameras was also explained – the cameras used by participants were 27-exposure, non-waterproof (for reasons of cost-saving), disposable cameras with built-in flash.

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Students were asked to choose a pseudonym by which they wanted to be known in the presentation of the results. They wrote this name on a piece of paper and were instructed to photograph it on the first frame.<sup>7</sup> This process allowed participants to practice using their camera and it enabled the subsequent photographs to be matched to the correct participant. Pseudonyms were recorded and the researcher collected the cameras at the conclusion of the briefings to ensure that students did not use up the film in their cameras before camp or forget to bring their cameras with them.

Students' cameras were re-distributed on the morning of their camp departure. Upon their return from camp, cameras were collected and the lead researcher arranged for the films to be processed. One set of hardcopy prints, the film negatives and digital images (on CD) were obtained, all of which were given to students to keep after their interview.

In the second phase of the study, individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted following school camp. These took place in the students' schools either before school, during lunchtimes, or after school (with the exception of one student who preferred to be interviewed at home). These interviews were recorded using a small, unobtrusive, digital recorder. They ranged from 23 to 53 minutes in duration. The delay between the return from camp and participation in the interview was between one and fifteen days. All interviews were transcribed and then imported into NVivo (a software package for the management of qualitative data) for analysis.

Each interview was organised into three stages and conducted by the lead researcher. First, students viewed their photographs and were encouraged to spend a few minutes looking at them. This was the first time either participants or the lead researcher had seen their photographs. (To minimise the possibility of making preconceived judgements, the researchers made a collective decision that the lead researcher should not look at the photographs prior to the interview.) Second, the photographs were spread on a desk and

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students were asked to provide a commentary about each photograph. (Students determined the order in which the photographs were discussed.) If necessary, to encourage dialogue, prompts like ‘Tell me about this photograph’ and ‘Why did you choose to take this photograph?’ were used. Third, participants were asked to choose one of their photographs to match each of five written photo-statements. This stage was adapted from Darbyshire et al. (2005), who used photo-statements as part of a multiple-method, qualitative approach to investigate children’s perceptions and experiences of place, space and physical activity. The photo-statements used in the present study were:

- 1) “This is my favourite photo from camp because.....”
- 2) “This photo from camp makes me feel.....because.....”
- 3) “This photo of.....shows what camp was like for me best because.....”
- 4) “What I liked most at camp was.....because.....”
- 5) “What I liked *least* about camp was.....because.....”

This stage was deliberately placed at the conclusion of the interview to prevent its semi-structured nature (i.e., prescribed, open-ended, photo-statements) from influencing the initial students’ discussions of their photographs. The students completed their photo-statements on prepared sheets of paper and the numbers of the photographs they selected for each statement were recorded.

### *Reflections on using photo-elicitation interviews with adolescents to evaluate outdoor education programmes*

In this section, we evaluate the use of the photo-elicitation interview method. Since the focus of this article is on evaluating the photo-elicitation interview method and not the ways in which students experience school camp, references to the school camp experiences described by the students in this study will be brief and only made where they illuminate the

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assessment of the method. (See Smith, Steel & Gidlow (2010) for a more in-depth discussion of the participants' school camp experiences).

The school camp narratives captured in this study highlight camp as an enjoyable, social experience, where students are able to explore peer networks in a novel environment which, from their perspective, is different from their usual home and school environs. Given that photo-elicitation interviewing is a novel approach in the area of outdoor education research, we felt that a separate assessment of the benefits and constraints of this technique was in order. Below, we offer our reflections of the use of this method in the context of our research. Our reflections are organised into four broad areas: (a) using participant-generated photographs; (b) eliciting responses, capturing experiences and establishing rapport; (c) the limits of a photograph; and (d) ethical considerations.

#### USING PARTICIPANT-GENERATED PHOTOGRAPHS

The photographs used in a photo-elicitation interview can be created in a number of ways and tend to vary according to the level of participant input. Some methods, for example, involve the researcher photographing or filming social settings with no input from research subjects, while other methods involve research participants directing the researcher as to what to capture on film or taking the actual images themselves (Collier Jr. & Collier, 1986). Due to the manner in which we have approached the concept of experience, we considered it vital that participants were in control of creating the photographs. Therefore, we adopted an approach in which students determined their photographic choices.

Providing students with cameras before camp differentiated our study from Loeffler's (2004a; 2004b; 2005) photo-elicitation interview study, also conducted in an outdoor context, but with university/college-aged participants. In that instance, students were recruited *after* their outdoor education experience so that the photography component of the study would not impact on students' outdoor experiences. Post-event recruitment was, therefore, restricted to

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those who owned cameras and took them on their outdoor education programmes. In the present study, we hoped that the provision of cameras would give all students the opportunity to participate, and that they would encourage students to be involved in the study. Indeed, we found this latter aspect to be the case. Some students responded to the invitation to participate because it sounded like a 'fun', interesting or good idea. The 'free' cameras provided a viable solution to camera access issues experienced by some students. As Caitlan commented, when explaining her motivation for participating in the project: '...I thought it sounded like a good idea doing this thing for you and I was like, it was a chance to have a camera out there as well, 'cause I don't have my own one.'

Providing students with an opportunity to take cameras to camp and allowing them to produce and retain their photographs was valued highly. It allowed participants to create photographic memories of the camp experience, at no financial cost to them. These aspects clearly appealed to this group of young people; many of them were certain that they would keep their photographs to remind them of their time at school camp. Their photographs constituted 'valuable memories' which students intended to post on social networking websites, put in photograph albums or scrapbooks, or display in their room. Tulip articulated her desire to remember camp in the following way.

I really wanted to get memories from camp, 'cause I know taking the family camera I could not do that, I couldn't trust myself. But, yeah, I just wanted memories from camp and it seemed like a good idea to do something 'cause I knew otherwise I wouldn't get any pictures, you know chasing everybody trying to get pictures and I know [teacher's name] has a couple of pictures of me like on the beam [a high ropes course activity], but ummm... otherwise I wouldn't have had any chance to, like, remember.

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Sentiments such as these echo findings from previous studies in which research participants also expressed a desire to remember their experiences through photography (for example, Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Loeffler, 2004b).

The desire to remember school camp through photography and the importance of their photographs to the participants, suggests that school camp is an important event in these young people's lives. Comments from staff at both schools, concerning the ways in which final year students often recall their time at school camp several years earlier, reinforce this conclusion. When considered alongside literature which highlights the ways in which photography is usually used to capture memorable events, rather than the ordinary and the familiar (Harrison, 2004; Shrove, Watson, Hand, & Ingram, 2007), use of the photo-elicitation interview technique in a participant-driven manner, as was the case in this study, may be particularly suitable for investigating important or unique events in the lives of adolescents.

The high value which students placed on the photographs they created may have contributed to the very low attrition rate recorded in this study: all students attended their interview, and just one camera was lost during data collection. High levels of interview attendance may also have resulted, however, from the way the lead researcher collected the cameras, arranged for processing and brought the photographs to each interview. This procedure ensured that image processing occurred in a timely manner, eliminated financial costs to the participants, and provided a motivation to students to attend the interviews in order to collect their photographs. These characteristics of the study were not designed to be incentives but, nonetheless, appear to have contributed to the willingness of students to participate and to the success of the study.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to appreciate that the photographs themselves are not the focus of the photo-elicitation interview method; rather, it is the meaning and significance attributed to the



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image by the participant that is of research interest (Carlsson, 2001; Pink, 2001). Only when viewed alongside their first-hand account does the photograph become meaningful from the point-of-view of the photographer (Martin & Martin, 2004) and, therefore, useful when investigating individual's experiences. With this in mind, discussion now turns to the ways in which participants' photographs elicited camp narratives and helped establish rapport.

#### ELICITING RESPONSES, CAPTURING EXPERIENCES AND ESTABLISHING RAPPORT

Like previous researchers (for example, Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Frith & Harcourt, 2007), we found that much of the photographic content (for example, a student standing on the sports field holding a bread and butter knife; a group of people sitting around a campfire; students playing volleyball) appeared unremarkable if viewed on its own. This was not the case from the students' perspectives. When interpreted by the student, the significance of the image became apparent. One category where this was particularly the case was humour. Students found humour in many of their photographs which, to the lead researcher – an outsider – rarely appeared to hold any humorous content. This finding is not at all surprising. Theory and research on the psychological sense of community suggest that incidents serve to distinguish ingroup members from outgroup members (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan & Wandersman, 1986; McMillan & Chavis, 1986) and promote group cohesion (Chavis & Pretty, 1999; McMillan 1996). Thus, capturing students' verbal accounts of their time at school camp was imperative in understanding *their* experiences. In addition, the presence of photographs assisted in eliciting responses and building rapport between the researcher and the student.

Using students' photographs in the interviews seemed to reduce the formality of being interviewed by an adult and encouraged them to articulate their experiences at school camp. This lingering social reticence was reflected in one student's apology for 'telling stories'.

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However, it is exactly the technique's ability to overcome such social barriers that provides a distinct benefit. The following story, for example, was told by a female student when describing a photograph of herself standing on a bridge.

Participant: ...Now there's a really good story behind that picture (pointing to her photograph).

Interviewer: Ok, go for it.

Participant: This is me, ummm...we did orienteering, it was probably my favourite activity, usually I hate it, but it was just really fun. I was with someone else who really wanted to do well and run, so we ran and it was really funny on this bridge. The bit that you hold on to is elastic.....and I was like going across, you know real fast and I had my pen in my hand and I was holding on and we needed the pen to write down the clues and I dropped the pen in the river. So, I get back off the bridge and I take my shoes off and I run up the river and I'm like splashing around and ummm...yeah I got to the pen, quite a bit up stream, trying to get to the thing and I climbed up onto the bridge and all my feet were really cut and I couldn't put my shoes back on and all my socks were ripped up like in shreds so I was like ok, but we came first, so it was quite hilarious. But, ummm...so that was quite funny 'cause I was like 'Crap! My pen!', and then I got it down the river and I was like 'it works'!

This student later revealed the importance of time spent orienteering in establishing a new friendship.

Participant: ...before kind of camp, I didn't really talk to Orchid that much, well we talked, but it was like hi, how's the weather? But ummm...yeah, so we were kind of, we were orienteering and we were running along and we were talking about stuff and she was talking to me about all this stuff and I was like oh yeah...I didn't know that

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and so we kind of got really close when we were orienteering and we were the only two girls from our class in our group for activities and we talked lots then as well.

Without this 'story' the photograph held little meaning for the researcher. This highly valuable datum was given in the commentary of the photographer, and could only be revealed by her.

The quotation, immediately above, also provides an example of the way in which the inclusion of photographs can uncover additional information that might not have been accessed in a traditional words-alone interview (see, for example, Clark-Ibanez, 2004). This effect, it is claimed (Harper, 1994), is a result of the different ways people respond to pictures compared with words.

The establishment of rapport is integral to the quality of qualitative research (Hay, 2000); and the inclusion of photographs seems to have contributed to this process. Students viewed their photographs for the first time at the beginning of their interview, and this immediately provided an alternative focus for the student-adult interaction during the interview. The majority of participants were excited to see their photographs and enjoyed recalling their time at camp as they looked through their images. Some made comments such as 'that came out quite cool' and 'oh...beautiful.'

Incorporating concrete objects – students' photographs – which became the focus of the interview, seemed to alleviate the pressure associated with being questioned directly (Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Collier Jr., 1957) and sustained responses in interviews which did not flow easily. Not all participants were equally articulate and the inclusion of photographs gave spontaneity to conversations with less articulate students – most of whom were male. This may have been a result of either the verbal reticence of adolescent boys, or the fact that the researcher was female and male participants were, therefore, more reluctant to engage with her. We note, however, that these two explanations are not unique to photo-elicitation

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interview studies. Thus, evidence of the inherent capacity of photographs, compared with other research methods, to elicit additional information is mixed. Nevertheless, the inclusion of photographs did add to the success of the study inasmuch as students' photographs did provide a strong stimulus for conversation.

#### WHAT CAN A CAMERA CAPTURE?

The question 'What can a camera capture?' can be considered in a number of ways. We discuss our reflections in this section according to two broad categories: social factors and physical factors.

##### Social factors

'Photography is a socially regulated and highly conventional activity' (Harrison, 2004: 28). Thus, not everything that can be photographed is photographed, and this can have a serious impact on the nature of the data one produces. Within the context of school camp, participant photographers are less likely to act as documenters than as tourists. In other words, they tend to record, figuratively speaking, the 'sunny weather' experiences and not the times when it is 'grey' and 'rainy'.

Photographic content and the associated camp narratives rarely included reference to aspects of camp which students considered to be 'negative'. In fact, most students found it difficult to match a photograph to their fifth photo-statement, 'What I liked least about camp was...' Given the open-ended and more participant-driven approach, students were not directed to photograph any particular aspects of camp and this almost certainly led to the absence of images of negative aspects of camp. We pose the following explanation for such findings. First, the content of amateur photographs is usually social in nature and they tend to portray 'people, their families and significant others, and their leisure pursuits as happy, healthy, together or united in untroubled worlds' (Harrison, 2004: 37). These sentiments were articulated by students in this study. Michael stated explicitly that he saw his participation in

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the study as an ‘opportunity to take some pictures of some friends’. Other students said they took photographs of things they enjoyed or that were ‘cool’, and Jessica said ‘I just took photos of quite good memories and stuff.’ Thus, in the absence of specific direction, participants may not voluntarily record aspects of camp which they dislike or have no wish to remember. This contrasts with Frith and Harcourt’s (2007) study involving cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy treatment. Those researchers found that participants did, indeed, photograph the negative aspects of experiencing cancer such as one’s hair falling out. Their findings might be a reflection of different social perceptions surrounding different types of experiences which subsequently influence the ways in which cameras are used. Being diagnosed with cancer and receiving treatment is not often construed as a ‘positive’ experience. Avoiding the more unpleasant aspects is thus difficult, and photographers might be more likely to act as ‘documenters’. In contrast, school camp is usually interpreted as being a positive, beneficial experience, often positioned as a highlight of the school year for students. For the most part then, negative school camp experiences are not socially expected.

While it might be difficult for researchers to capture ‘negative’ outdoor education experiences using the photo-elicitation interview method, the social norms governing the use of cameras in such contexts might render it a potentially useful method for developing a ‘sociological analysis’ of outdoor education experiences. Clearly, the school camp narratives captured in this study point to the importance of the social experience during outdoor education programmes (Smith, Steel & Gidlow, 2010), and echo findings reported by other researchers using the photo-elicitation interview technique with similarly aged participants. For example, the young people in Morrow’s (2001) study emphasised the importance of their social lives when describing their experiences of urban environments.

The ways in which photography is a social act are also apparent when the influence of ‘other’ people – non-research participants – upon data collection is considered. Some

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researchers have noted a tension between participants determining the content of their photographs and other people, not participating directly in the research, influencing the photographic choices of research participants (Dean, 2007; Frith & Harcourt, 2007). If other people influence the research process (in this case the taking of photographs), this can potentially distort the 'truth' which participants choose to depict in their photographs. While Frith and Harcourt (2007) reported benefits of other people becoming involved in the research process, we found the influence of other, non-participant students, using participants' cameras or directing the usage of cameras to be detrimental.

Participants may be unaware that other students had taken photographs with their cameras. Jacob had seven photographs that he did not know had been taken, while another student commented that her friend had told her there might be some 'surprise' photographs.

Non-participating students sometimes made suggestions about what research participants should photograph and the research participants usually complied. For example, Jonty intended to save his final exposure to capture his last view of the campsite from the bus, or of the bus driver unloading their bags back at school, but his friend asked him to take a picture of her and he complied. Again, this highlights the social nature of school camp and the use of cameras, inasmuch as the photographer's original intention was perhaps more documentary in nature, but the resultant photograph of his friend was a consequence of the value placed on meeting friendship (i.e., social) obligations.

The creation of photographs which were not taken by participants or specifically generated by them raises questions as to their significance and whether or not they should be included in the photo-elicitation interview. We felt that such photographs did not represent the student's own perspective and we chose the more conservative approach of eliminating them from the study.

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Self-censorship remains a problem with this technique, much as it does in most other self-report data collection methods. Within the act of taking a photograph are many unconscious and conscious choices; in particular, the timing and content of the photograph. The self-censorship issue was noticeably overt in one case. Andy, a research participant, took her research camera and her personal camera to camp. During the course of her interview, she revealed that she had used these two cameras for different purposes. She explained that she knew the lead researcher would view photographs taken on the research camera which influenced her choice of photographs. In the case of her personal camera, however, she took photographs of her friends which ‘no one else should ever see...like we [referring to her friends] all look horrible...They’re photos that are so embarrassing that only us four will ever see them.’ This situation highlights the impact that the intended audience or consumption of the photographs may have on the data participants produce. Aside from the possible censorship of images to which a researcher will be privy, participants might select – either consciously or not – the content of their photographs based on whether they have it in mind to swap photographs with friends or send them to relatives, for example. The inclusion in the hypothetical scenario of the phrase ‘Pretend you are going to post the series of photographs you take on your personal webpage’ might have had a similar effect as well.

### Physical factors

There were other forms of constraints on our participants’ ability to record their experience. One, especially, is specific to our study and not to the overall method. Owing to resource limitations, the cameras used in this study were inexpensive, non-waterproof, disposable cameras. Prior to data collection, it was known that students would be unable to take their cameras to the water activities in which they participated; however, we underestimated the high value which students would place on these activities. (We will comment later on the implications of this for future use of photo-elicitation methods in

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outdoor, nature-based, recreational settings.) To help alleviate this effect, in Phase 2 – the interview phase - students were asked if there were other aspects of camp they would have liked to have photographed.<sup>9</sup>

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As with all research, there are ethical issues associated with using a photo-elicitation interview approach, and these were further complicated by the use of young people (i.e., ‘minors’) as participants. Wiles et al. (2008) present a review of the key ethical issues inherent to research employing visual methods. We encountered many of these same issues and we will discuss them in the context of the present study.

The primary ethical issues associated with visual research methods arise as a result of the production of images that depict identifiable (or potentially identifiable) people (Wiles et al., 2008). Thus researchers must carefully consider the ways in which they might present their findings in monographs, theses, journals, magazines and newspapers, and whether or not they will reproduce participants’ photographs. While the photographs are not the research data, and it could, therefore, be argued that the inclusion of photographs in the write-up of results is unnecessary, they can often provide illustrative material. We obtained student and parental consent for use of photographs as part of satisfying the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee as to the ethical soundness of our study, but due to the large proportion of photographs depicting people – consistent with the major satisfactions of school camp from a student perspective – participant anonymity could not be guaranteed if many of these photographs were reproduced. Although pseudonyms were used in all written material, protecting visual identities presented a significant ethical challenge. It is possible that readers might recognise a particular photograph which, if connected to a given respondent quotation, would reveal the photographer’s identity. For example, Jon completed his third photo-statement in the following way. ‘This photograph from camp makes me feel happy because it



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shows I can get along really well with people I never thought I would have.’ If this statement is presented alongside the photograph which elicited this response, and a reader recognises the photograph and knows the photographer, ‘Jon’ is no longer anonymous. Thus, it is not so much the risk of readers being able to identify individuals in the photographs, but rather the risk of readers being able to identify *research participants*, which is of most concern. Consequently, to maintain participants’ anonymity, we believe that participant-generated photographs should only be published if it is possible that any one of several individuals could have created it, or if an alternative consent arrangement is entered into.

In hindsight, alternative ethical arrangements could have been considered; particularly in light of Tolich’s (2001) discussion of the ‘small-town’ nature of New Zealand and the difficulties of guaranteeing anonymity in such a setting. For example, a covenantal agreement – that any photographs used will only portray participants in a positive manner and only after agreement from them that individual images can be used – might have been sought (see Wiles et al., 2008).

Another ethical conundrum has to do with the use of images depicting other people who had not provided consent to be in the study. On the one hand, the photographs were ‘private’, in as much as they were intended for the participant’s own personal use. On the other hand, they were also intended for research purposes. This is a much trickier issue that has resulted in researchers holding diverse opinions, and that caused much discussion in our small research team. Wiles et al. (2008) suggest that consent issues (to be photographed and for the subsequent photographs to be used) should be negotiated on a project-by-project basis. So, in the end, we opted to use the following guidelines. For the interview, all the photographs which had been taken could be used. For any publication of the results, we would use only those that were highly unlikely to embarrass or otherwise provide discomfort

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to the people in the image. Furthermore, easily recognised faces in the images would be pixelated prior to inclusion in any publication.

One could go further and stipulate that images which include people are to be used only when those people are conducting their activities in either public settings or places where they could reasonably expect that they might be photographed. As it turned out, this was not a consideration in our research; all photographs included because they complemented the discussion of results fitted this last criterion. We note, also, that these self-imposed rules could be easily rendered completely unnecessary. Recall that the purpose of the photographs in the photo-elicitation interview technique is to act as points of discussion. Using the photo-elicitation interview technique, it is entirely possible to have participants produce visual data and never include a photograph in any final publication. This explains why we have chosen *not* to reproduce any participants' photographs here.

Respecting the privacy of young people participating in research is also an important ethical consideration. As noted at the beginning of this paper, a benefit of including photographs in the research process is that they allow the researcher to see a visual representation of events from which they were absent. However, including a visual representation (rather than words alone) in the process also raises issues of protecting participants' privacy. Although participants were aware that their photographs would be used for research purposes (and, therefore, might censor the photographs they take accordingly), we elected to return the processed packets of photographs unopened so that participants could select which photographs were discussed during the interview. This process is consistent with that employed by Morrow (2001) when investigating the ways in which young people view their social networks and communities.

### *Future directions*

The photo-elicitation interview method is a useful approach when working with adolescents and investigating their experience of events which are important and/or unique to them, but it is not without limitations. Based on current experience, the following recommendations are made to researchers who might consider applying the photo-elicitation interview technique when investigating aspects of adolescents' lives in the same or related contexts.

Comparative studies designed to investigate differences in participants' narratives when obtained using photo-elicitation interviews and words-alone interviews, seem to be a notable omission from the current photo-elicitation interview literature. Collier's (1957) early experimental work is an exception. His study explored the impact of including cameras and participant-generated photographs in the research process upon the data generated. Within an outdoor education context, a comparative study of this nature would be particularly useful to help determine the saliency of the social experiences articulated by students in this study relative to other potential camp experiences. That is, while the *presence* of the social experience articulated by students in this study is valid, the *dominance* of this experience might be a direct result of the inclusion of cameras which are often used for capturing the social aspects of life, particularly when preceded by an instruction related to publication on a 'social space' website such as Facebook. Conversely, given the social norms governing the use of cameras, the photo-elicitation interview method seems particularly suitable for investigating positive social experiences of adolescents when used in an open-ended, exploratory manner, such as that adopted in this study. Use of this method might also contribute to developing researchers' understandings of outdoor education programmes as social experiences.

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Another fruitful avenue of enquiry would be to conduct a comparative photo-elicitation study involving participants of different age cohorts. While photo-elicitation interviewing has successfully been used with participants of many ages, it seems that, to date, an evaluation of the ways in which the technique might be more or less appropriate with younger participants (teenagers rather than adults) has not been conducted. For example, although the current study demonstrated that adolescents do censor their pictures, reasons for this might differ from those of adult participants. On the one hand, because of their stage of life, adolescents might create photographs more spontaneously. On the other hand, adults might be more deliberate in their photographic choices, and may even dismiss important subject matter (to them) because they consider it irrelevant or uninteresting to the researcher. These issues warrant further exploration in the photo-elicitation interview literature.

Given that the photo-elicitation interview technique relies on photographic stimuli which are used to elicit subjective accounts of individuals' experiences, influences which colour the content of participants' photographs and any subsequent distortion of participants' accounts need to be minimised. In the present study, we found that the following all influenced the content of students photographs: the involvement of other, non-participant students; the presence of participants' personal (i.e., non-research) cameras; students forgetting to take their research cameras to some camp activities; and the type of research cameras provided. Thus, future photo-elicitation studies will need to continue to investigate the impact of such aspects upon the research, and develop ways to address these issues.

To a limited extent, enquiring about other content which students might have wished to photograph, but were unable or unwilling to record, alleviated some of the limitations associated with the type of cameras used in this study. However, given the importance placed on water activities by these students, then within an outdoor education context, good quality waterproof cameras should be used to ensure that participants are restricted as little as

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possible by the quality of the camera in the types of things they are able to photograph. In addition, cameras with the capacity to print the time and date on each photograph would also provide supplementary information as to what portion of a participant's experience might be represented in their set of photographs. For example, were all the images taken on the first or the last day of school camp? This may require the purchase of more expensive, multi-use cameras, and this, as well as increasing the expense of the research, might introduce other complications associated with the technical use of the cameras. Nevertheless, researchers should consider carefully the implications of different types of cameras and their capabilities when designing their studies.

Researchers should also consider the ways in which 'negative' experiences may or may not be articulated in students' narratives. As noted by other researchers (see, for example, Gordon & Dodunski, 1999), it seems unlikely that all students experience events such as school camp so positively, and obtaining first-hand student accounts of negative aspects of outdoor programmes would add further insight into the ways in which participants experience these programmes. The open-ended manner in which photo-elicitation interviewing was used in this study elicited few school camp narratives which might be considered negative. In our view, there are three possible explanations for this omission, two of which we have addressed above: the social norms governing the use of cameras, and the ways in which school camp is constructed as a positive event. The third explanation relates to the recruitment method used. The students whose experiences are represented in this study were self-selected, so may be more likely to hold positive views of school camp in the first instance.

An alternative to the self-selection recruitment method used in this study would be to access a list of all potential participants and randomly select the required number. However, implementing such a process within the context of a New Zealand school may not always be

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practicable because of a lack of time on the part of assisting school staff. Indeed, an additional consideration in this study was to minimise the research workload for school staff. Ethical obligations associated with involving minors in research and gaining ‘informed consent’ would also require careful consideration in this alternative recruitment method.

If self-selection were the only practicable and ethically defensible recruitment method, a more directive approach might need to be used in which students are asked to photograph things they do not like about school camp. Associated ethical issues, of course, would need to be carefully thought through. Such direction would impact on the extent to which a study might be participant-driven, but might be necessary if researchers and practitioners are to be more informed regarding the likely negative experiences of students.

This study also incorporated photo-statements which are a useful way to gather students’ experiences in a concise and manageable way, and the content of which can be compared to verbal accounts. However, photo-statements might be more usefully applied using a more open-ended approach, rather than the semi-structured manner in which they were used in this study. For example, asking students to select the five photographs which showed best what camp was like for them and then write a statement for each, would avoid issues of students not having photographs to match prepared research statements.

### *Closing statement*

This exploration of using photo-elicitation interviews has contributed to the methodological pluralism emerging in outdoor education research. It is encouraging that within the context of our study, many of the benefits of photo-elicitation interviewing are evident; thus, the technique warrants further application in the outdoor education field. Given the conceptualisation of experience we outline in this article, first-hand accounts were integral to understanding the ways in which students experience outdoor education programmes. These accounts offer, via photo-elicitation interviews, an alternative means to

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assess the value of providing such programmes. Although using cameras to generate stimuli from which students could discuss their camp experiences resulted in some aspects of camp not being represented in the photographs, this inherent weakness is offset by the ways in which the inclusion of cameras and photographs engaged students in the research process and assisted in their building rapport with an unknown, adult, researcher. In addition, participant-photography seems to be a useful way to investigate the social experiences of outdoor programmes. Thus, providing researchers consider carefully the advantages and limitations raised in this article, we reinforce Loeffler's conclusion that photo-elicitation interviewing seems to be an appropriate means of exploring the ways in which young people experience outdoor education programmes.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Loeffler's (2004a, 2004b, 2005) photo-elicitation interview study was conducted in an outdoor adventure context. However, the participants in her study were university/college-aged students.

<sup>2</sup> Epstein et al. (2006) investigated the experience of a specialised summer camp on the part of child cancer patients using the photo-elicitation interview technique, but the photographs used were researcher-generated.

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<sup>3</sup> The Special Section in the *Journal of Experiential Education*, 31(1) focusing on the concept of experience and calling for greater theorisation of the term is timely (Fox, 2008a; 2008b; Roberts, 2008; Seaman 2008).

<sup>4</sup> This study, along with all documentation, was approved by the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee.

<sup>5</sup> In New Zealand, a state integrated school is a school with a special (religious) character, which has been integrated into the state (public) system.

<sup>6</sup> This decile rating is a socio-economic indicator used to divide New Zealand schools into 10 equal groups and funding is administered accordingly. Schools with a higher decile rating (for example, 8 to 10), have a lower proportion of students from low socio-economic communities than schools with lower decile ratings (for example, 1 to 4). We are aware of the concern with the representativeness of the findings which arise from our research. This point is not, however, taken up in this paper, which explores the utility of a research method – photo-elicitation interviews – in research on young people in outdoor education settings.

<sup>7</sup> All participant names used in this paper (and other presentations of the results) are pseudonyms.

<sup>8</sup> In accordance with social science ethical standards, the lead researcher informed participants of their right to withdraw their participation from the project at any stage. They were also informed that in this eventuality, the photographs would still be theirs to keep.

<sup>9</sup> The restrictions which the use of non-waterproof cameras placed upon photographic opportunities would have been compounded had the weather been inclement during the school camps.



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