Chapter 2
Conducting the Mmogo-method

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Abstract This chapter sets out to describe the Mmogo-method and four distinct phases in its application. In Phase 1, researchers create a context for optimal participation by introducing group norms. In Phase 2, participants are asked to sit together around a table. Each is presented with a standard set of materials: malleable clay, beads or buttons in different colours, dried grass stalks (or suitable substitute), and a circular piece of cloth, packed in a container. Following an open-ended prompt, participants construct visual representations (visual data) representing the phenomenon that is the focus of the research. The representations are photographed (visual data). In Phase 3, each individual explains her or his visual representation (visual and textual data), and group members discuss individual participants’ interpretations of the images they have made (interactional data), augmenting content with their views (textual data). In Phase 4, the data-gathering session is concluded by debriefing participants as well as researchers (textual data). The fact that not all participants may want to join a group or construct visual images could limit the method’s application. The Mmogo-method is not indicated for anyone who has been traumatized recently, or who finds it difficult to deal with reality or is unwilling to participate in a group.

Introduction

This chapter describes the Mmogo-method as a qualitative data-collecting method with which social researchers are able to obtain different perspectives and different types of data about social phenomena in a relatively short space of time. The Mmogo-method is used to collect visual and textual data. Visual data are generated by participants and serve to elicit discussions from individuals and the group.

‘The Mmogo-method® is a registered South African trademark of the North-West University.

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Photos are taken of the visual representations and are used with the verbatim discussions for further analysis.

The Mmogo-method is useful in accessing data about social issues in which people are so immersed that they find it difficult to distance themselves. For example, pregnant women were able to illustrate the meaning they attached to their first pregnancy (Redelinghuys, Coetzee, & Roos, 2014). Similarly, mental health counsellors demonstrated coping strategies they relied on when continually exposed to childhood trauma (Keyter & Roos, 2015; Roos, Van der Westhuizen, & Keyter, 2016); and young adults and older persons demonstrated their experiences in relation to one another (Roos, 2016a, 2016b).

The method can be used to explore implicit culturally-bounded phenomena, for example, the resilience of black youth in South Africa exposed to risks such as entrenched poverty, HIV and AIDS, and abuse (Theron, 2012). It can be applied to engage people without having to rely primarily on verbal accounts. For instance, field workers were able to identify risks in their communities that could potentially lead to disasters such as collapsing buildings, polluted water, and exposed electrical connections (Van Niekerk et al., 2007). Older persons were able to illustrate the different dimensions of their quality of life in long-term residential care facilities and complement these with minimal verbal explanations and journal entries (Van Biljon & Roos, 2016).

The Mmogo-method makes it possible to obtain insights in settings in which participants speak a different language from the researcher, for example, to learn about coping strategies of Setswana-speaking older persons who were dealing with drought as a slow-onset disaster (Roos, Chigeza, & Van Niekerk, 2010). This information was subsequently used in disaster risk management plans to harness the coping strategies of older persons. The method may be usefully employed as part of multiphased and transdisciplinary research projects. For example, to explore a sense of place in rural landscapes, participants visually constructed their experience of the landscape (Vredefort Dome World Heritage Site, in this instance) in Phase 1 of the research. The findings of Phase 1 were used in Phase 2 to develop a questionnaire to determine the sense of place of this particular landscape so that it could be integrated into spatial planning and to develop guidelines for development (Phase 3) (Puren, Drewes, & Roos, 2008). The Mmogo-method proved to be valuable in interdisciplinary research in a study in which spatial planners aimed to identify places of importance in communities so that urban conservation and urban development could be integrated. In that study, the method was applied to produce visual constructions of places of importance in two mining communities (Khuma and Stilfontein) (Puren & Roos, 2016). These served as a foundation for developing spatial guidelines.

The open-ended and eliciting nature of the Mmogo-method and its application in a group setting mean that it is not indicated for use with people who have recently been exposed to trauma or who suffer from a mental illness. The method’s open-endedness could aggravate psychological distress in participants, and the group context may not be appropriate for the individual needs of participants who struggle to deal with reality. It is also contra-indicated, out of respect, if an individual is
uncomfortable about participating in a group setting, or to participate in research using these specific unstructured materials.

**Phases of the Research Process**

The phases of the research process consist of preparation for the investigation and four phases during which data are collected.

**Preparation** This entails obtaining the set of materials to collect data; assessing the venue for data collection to ensure that quality visual and textual information is captured; determining researchers’ skills; and attending to the practicalities of conducting the research.

**Materials** The materials required should be as unstructured as possible to allow for the expression of all possible associations by participants. Each set of materials includes: a lump of malleable clay (two handfuls – see a recipe in Box 2.1), dried grass straws (a fistful) strong enough to hold clay and brittle enough to be broken into smaller pieces, beads or buttons in different colours and sizes (half a handful), and a circular piece of cloth (25 cm in diameter), which serves to define the working area in which participants construct their visual images (Fig. 2.1).

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**Box 2.1: Suggested Recipe for Malleable Clay (One Portion)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mix together:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>500 ml cake flour</td>
<td>200 ml salt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 ml cream of tartar</td>
<td>500 ml cold water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook at low temperature until a hard round ball has formed. Then add:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 ml oil</td>
<td>2.5 ml vanilla essence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 ml brown food colouring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knead until mixed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add more oil when dough is dry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store in a sealed container</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The materials should be sufficient for the number of participants expected, and are divided into matching sets accordingly. Each set is packed into any kind of lidded container, which should be the same for all participants. Each container is filled with a portion of clay, packed in a clear plastic bag, the beads or buttons in a small container, and the grass stalks or straws, neatly arranged. The containers are placed in a basket or a bigger container for easy transport (Fig. 2.1).
Venue and Equipment  The room or area where data collection takes place should have tables and chairs that can be arranged in a circle or placed to allow participants to observe one another’s visual representations and to facilitate discussion, as illustrated in Fig. 2.2 where two different communities (Setswana-speaking young adults in a rural community (on the left) and older persons in a residential facility (on the right) participated in the method.

The venue where data will be collected will determine how the research will be conducted and what equipment will be required to ensure that quality data are obtained. For example, if the research is to be conducted in a well-equipped room with wide-angle video facilities and directional microphones, only one researcher is required, provided that she or he speaks the same language as the participants. If they do not speak the same language, at least two additional people who are fluent in the participants’ language are included: one translates to the researcher while the other confirms the translation.

More researchers are required if the venue is not well-equipped. Some would be needed to operate the video and audio recorders to ensure good quality verbal data. This means that they would be moving around during the group discussion to ensure that they capture every participant’s input as clearly as possible. (See, for example, Fig. 2.3). Although it is possible for an individual researcher to conduct the data-collection process, more researchers are preferred because it allows for multiple descriptions and reflection (McNiff, 2013).

Researchers’ Skills and Practicalities  Researchers who conduct the method should be trained in qualitative interviewing so that they are able to deal with any emotional content elicited as a consequence of the projective nature of the process. They should also know how to conduct research in groups and deal with group dynamics.

Researchers should attend to practicalities such as sourcing name tags to identify participants and researchers, pens and paper and a camera to capture the participants’ visual representations, and preparing informed consent letters. Because the data-collection session usually lasts for 2–3 h, refreshments should be provided for participants. Researchers should contact counsellors to be available for debriefing if individual participants should require this after the data-collection process has concluded.
Data Collection

Data collection is conducted in four distinct phases. In Phase 1, researchers enter the research context. Phase 2 covers construction of the representations, and during Phase 3 participants are questioned individually about the meanings of their visual representations, and the views of group members are obtained. In Phase 4, participants and researchers are debriefed.

Phase 1: Entering the Research Context

This is achieved by creating a transparent context for participation, introducing group norms, and obtaining informed consent.

A transparent context for participation is created when researchers meet participants, introduce themselves and wear name tags so that participants may address them by name. A context of safety is created by explaining the goal of the research and the research process itself.

Although ethical considerations differ somewhat across settings and institutions, it is particularly important to inform participants before data collection takes place.
that they will be asked to construct visual representations by using unstructured materials; that photos will be taken of the research process and the visual representations; and that the research will take place in a group, which means that anonymity can be assured only partially; and that the session will be video recorded. Participants should be assured that the representations they have created will not be assessed or judged and that there is no set right or wrong way to participate in the process. Participants will not be identified when reporting findings unless expressly requested to do so by the participants themselves (Cherrington, 2016).

To ensure that participants understand clearly what will be expected of them, researchers engage with them individually to explain the process. It is emphasized that participants are under no obligation to participate if they do not want to. Informed consent forms are explained and signed only after the participants have agreed to take part. Each is issued with a name tag. If participants wish to take part in the research by joining in discussions, but without constructing anything, they are also welcomed into the group.

Phase 2: Construction Phase Participants are asked to form one or more groups, depending on their numbers. The optimal group size is between six and 10 participants. The researchers present each participant with a set of materials in a lidded container. They ask participants to open the containers so that they can discover for themselves what is inside and unpack the materials (Fig. 2.1). To allow for participants’ own interpretations, no specific instructions are given for using the materials.

Next, participants are given an open-ended prompt. To illustrate this, the following prompt is given as an example: *Please use the materials and make something that will show us how you experience your relationship with people younger than 25 years* (Roos, 2016a). The unstructured nature of the prompt and of the materials tends at first to provoke uncertainty. Participants often ask for the request to be repeated. The researcher repeats the instruction using the same wording. Participants are again reminded that there is no right or wrong way to proceed. They may create their visual representations in any way they like using the materials provided. Typical comments during the initial construction phase are: “This brings back childhood memories”; “Playing with clay feels only too familiar”; “We are not at all artistic”; “I do not know what to make”; “It’s difficult”; “It’s fun”. Researchers remain silent and allow participants space to find their own interpretation of the prompt. When participants begin their visual constructions, the researchers retreat into the background and avoid making comments or a distracting noise.

Individual participants differ in their ability to deal with the uncertainty when they start constructing objects. Groups also respond differently. Some hardly talk among themselves, while others have lively conversations and share their materials. The researchers do not give them any instructions about this. The video and audio recorders are used during this phase to capture informal discussions among participants. Examples of participants engaged in the construction phase are shown in Fig. 2.4.
Participants use the materials in various ways, sometimes breaking the dried grass stalks into smaller pieces, using the container or its lid, or selecting beads in specific colours to construct their objects. These details may be meaningful to participants and should be enquired about in the discussion phase. Figure 2.5 shows how a participant, in response to a prompt about experiences of relationships with younger people, carefully selected beads in specific colours which to her represented life and joy.

In Fig. 2.6, a participant used the container’s lid to make a church. He explained that the church should be stable and solid because it represented spirituality and spiritual relationships which gave him the strength to cope with the challenges associated with his occupation as a mental health care worker who has to deal with child abuse on a regular basis.

In the example below (Fig. 2.7), the participant used the circular cloth to symbolize her house as a safe and secure place in exploring her experiences of quality of life in a residential setting.

Vigilant observations on the part of the researchers are most important. Sometimes participants struggle to open containers, or find it difficult to work the clay because it may be too hard or too soft for what they had in mind. Researchers assist participants if needed. They also observe if there are signs of emotional expression in participants’ handling of the research material. For example, in research
conducted with older black Africans who were making visual images elicited by the prompt, *Please make any image that will tell us how you experience relationships in your life*, one older woman struggled to build a house (Fig. 2.8).

The straws were too short and kept falling on to the structure that she was building. She repeated the process patiently but seemingly without success. In the discussion phase, when asked about her visual representation, she described herself as part of a multigenerational household whose main source of income was the state pension she received. She said how tired she was of trying to keep everything together in managing the household. She also explained that she was solely responsible for a ramshackle house she had inherited from her parents and which required extensive renovations.

**Fig. 2.5** Colourful beads to symbolize life and joy

**Fig. 2.6** Representation of a church as stable support to assist coping
In another example, a group of young adults was asked to make a visual representation of how they experienced their relationships with older people. During the visual construction, one female participant kept pointing out that she had an allergic reaction to the materials, because she couldn’t explain her watering eyes. A researcher went to her and asked quietly if she would prefer to withdraw. She decided to continue, but in the course of explaining her visual representation she started crying about the loss of a grandparent four months previously. She decided to leave the group to recover her composure and a researcher accompanied her. She chose later to rejoin the group and contribute to the group discussion.

![Fig 2.7 Representation of a safe and secure house](image1)

Fig 2.7 Representation of a safe and secure house

![Fig. 2.8 Representation of a dilapidated house](image2)

Fig. 2.8 Representation of a dilapidated house
The construction phase usually takes about 30–45 min, with not all participants completing their constructions at the same time. When researchers see that some participants have completed their visual constructions, they approach them and ask if they would like to take a comfort break and wash their hands. Participants are also invited to help themselves to refreshments. When participants get up to wash their hands or to have refreshments, the researcher asks if their visual representations may be photographed. The participants’ name tags are placed close to their visual representations in order to link the verbal discussion with the visual image during transcription. In presenting the findings, however, their names on the name tags will be removed from the photos. Photos of the three-dimensional visual representations are taken from different angles to ensure that all possible perspectives are captured. When all participants have had the opportunity to take a comfort break, the next phase begins.

**Phase 3: Discussion** When all the participants have returned to their seats, the researcher invites members of the group to explain individually what they have made and asks for a volunteer to start the discussion. The researcher usually stands behind the participant to have the same view as the participant’s when making the construction. The researcher is thus able to observe the visual objects from the same perspective as the participant had in mind. By standing behind the participant, the other participants can have a clear view of the visual representation. In a research setting in which researchers have to manoeuvre the audio recorders to ensure good quality verbal data, they stand close enough to obtain a clear recording but need to ensure that they do not intrude into the participants’ space.

The participant who volunteered first is asked: *Please tell us what you have made?* Researchers listen attentively to the explanation. The line of questioning is conducted in dialogue format, and the researcher asks questions that follows the participant’s explanations. It is important to refrain from reading meanings into the visual images. Verification strategies to clarify participants’ explanations could include a summary of what the researcher had heard the participant saying and requesting verification if necessary. The manner of questioning should be to prompt a more elaborate explanation. Researchers should ensure that they ask questions about specific objects, shapes, use of colours, placement of objects, relationship among objects, and most of all the relevance of the visual representation to the research question. Figure 2.9 provides an example of a participant explaining her visual representation.

After the individual has talked about the visual representation and responded to the researcher’s questions, others in the group are invited to add their views. This combination of views is regarded as ongoing member checking. The individual member’s visual representation thus becomes the stimulus material for group discussion. Video recordings may also be used to obtain data about the interactions between participants.

The dialogical nature of the discussions emphasizes the importance of training of researchers in interviewing techniques. All discussions are recorded and transcribed verbatim, thus serving as textual data.
Phase 4: Debriefing  Debriefing on completion of the data-collection process is required both for the participants and the researchers. At the end of the discussion, participants are invited to take the representations they created away with them if they wish. They are asked formally, in the group, how they experienced the session and are invited to approach the researchers, who will be available for individual follow-up discussion about their experiences if they should want that. Researchers then approach the participants individually and informally to obtain their feedback about the process and to find out how they experienced participating in self-constructed visual research. If participants indicate that they would like to talk to counsellors about the emotions elicited by the process, they are provided with contact details of the counsellors who had previously been alerted to be on standby to help them, or where possible, provide counselling services on-site. The session is concluded when participants and researchers have shared refreshments informally. The models should be preserved in the presence of the participants. When participants depart, researchers collect the containers used for the materials and depart.

The researchers meet to share observations and to engage in discussion as soon as possible after data collection. This also serves as debriefing for them. Focusing on themselves, the researchers engage in a process described by Steier (1991) as “bending back on the self” (p. 2), noting how their interactions could have impacted on the participants and on the quality of the data obtained. The discussion also provides an opportunity for researchers to reflect on the impact the exercise had on them. This discussion is recorded and referred to once analysis of the data begins, thereby constituting another source of data.
Rationale for Using the Mmogo-method

The method is applied by bringing individual participants together in a group and requesting them to construct visual images which are used to elicit individual and group discussions. Involving people in this manner allows for data collection at the individual and the group level. At the individual level, participants share their perspectives or experiences about a specific social phenomenon by means of visual representations they construct and describe. On the group level, data are obtained that are uniquely group-specific because of the way in which context for participation was created and the composition of the particular group. Involving people in a group provides opportunities for acquiring multiple perspectives on the social phenomenon under investigation.

No method is without limitations. Involving people in groups to collect data offers many benefits, but some participants may feel uncomfortable about expressing themselves in a group context or making visual representations. As with any focus group, strategies should be applied to navigate the discussion if one or more members tend to take over. If a group is inclined to be judgemental or overcritical, researchers should remind the participants that there is no particular right or wrong way of responding to the research question.

Conclusion

The Mmogo-method is proposed as a data-collection method which combines research and social elements that mirror the complexity of social reality. A research context that is transparent, inclusive and safe is created to promote participation. In this research context, participants generate visual data about their personal experiences and perspectives by using basic materials with multiple possibilities to make visual representations elicited by an open-ended prompt. Involving people in groups in research creates opportunities for the multidimensionality of social phenomena to emerge from the discussions and interactions among the participants. Due to the projective nature of the method, debriefing participants is necessary to address any lingering emotional content. Researchers are part of co-construction of the social processes and they too require debriefing to allow for the impact they experienced during the research process and so that they may reflect on their own impact on data collection. The combination of research and social elements in the method as well as the manner in which data collection takes place contributes to the production of rich data that can provide nuanced descriptions of social phenomena in a short space of time. The several sources of data obtained in one data-collection session may be used to describe complex social phenomena such as intergenerational relationships (Chaps. 5 and 6), meaning-making during pregnancy (Chap. 7), coping strategies of mental health care workers (Chap. 11), and to develop theories (Chap. 8), and interventions (Chap. 9).
References


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