



Toolkit #01

Informed Consent in Visual Research

Seeking consent for the use of images obtained in photo elicitation: Reflections from the Living Resemblances project

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1. About this toolkit

This toolkit aims to share our experiences of seeking informed consent to use digital photographs we made of participants family photographs in the Living Resemblances project, where we employed photo elicitation methods during wider semi-structured interviews.



Where you see this image you can download supporting documents from our website, from the same web page as this toolkit.

2. Seeking consent during the interview itself

During qualitative interviews, I discussed people's family photos. Participants showed me photos in albums, displayed in their homes, got out shoe boxes of old photos and showed me photos saved on their computers. At the end of the interviews, I asked participants whether I could take a digital photograph of the photographs for analysis purposes within the research team. Verbal consent for this usage of the images was tape recorded with a view to seeking more formal, written consent to disseminate the photographs beyond the research team.

Things to bear in mind when seeking verbal consent during interviews:

Seeking consent to photograph participant's photographs in this way can pose some practical difficulties to bear in mind:

- Participants may show you lots of photos at once and it isn't always easy to be systematic when photographing them at the end of an interview. This can lead to problems matching images with the transcriptions later on.

- Leaving the discussion about consent to the end of interviews can make it difficult to make sure you photograph all the photos you have discussed in the interview.

Because of these practicalities it is important to think carefully about when to raise the issue of consent. Most participants were happy to allow me to photograph their photographs but it is not always helpful to turn the conversation onto 'official business' in the middle of elicitation and this is why I left it to the end of most interviews. It is likely that you will have to make these decisions during the course of your interviews.

3. Negotiating different levels of consent

There are a number of different levels of usage of family photographs and it is important to think about the ethical and practical issues involved in seeking consent for these different levels. For example, although we were happy that tape-recorded verbal consent was adequate for us to photograph photographs and use them within the research team for analysis purposes (and the majority of participants were happy to consent to this level of usage during the interview), we felt it was necessary to seek more formal consent before sharing the images with a wider audience. We also felt that showing an image during a presentation (as long as it is not reproduced in handouts or on websites and that the presentation is run from a data stick and deleted from any computers) was different to publishing it in a form where copies could be made publicly available and that archiving photographs (for example in Qualidata) requires another level of consent again.

- We rejected the idea of archiving photographs, figuring the confidentiality issues were too great and that the interview transcripts could be re-used fruitfully without the accompanying images.
- We also drafted a number of consent forms listing the remaining levels of usage, asking people to decide whether they consented for their photos to be used in presentations only, presentations and printed publications etc. However, these forms were unnecessarily complex, confusing and potentially worrying and off-putting to participants.
- We decided to provide participants with a simple decision where they could answer yes or no to having their photographs published.
- It is important to think ahead about the various ways you might want to use the images in the future (such as in training courses or teaching) when planning the wording on your form.



Download sample document from the toolkit page of our website:
Photo reproduction rights form sent to participants

4. Thinking through who can give consent

It is important to consider the ethics of who can give consent for the use of the images you have obtained.

During the interview, one participant – Andrew – had only felt able to provide consent for me to photograph images of him and his children, he didn't feel he had the right to give consent for me to photograph photographs he owned of his brother's children despite us having discussed this particular image at length:

Extract from field diary:

Andrew seemed unsure about the photographs – he pulled a face when I mentioned at the start that it might be interesting to look at some family photographs, so it was with some trepidation that I brought it up at the end and I'm not sure that it was particularly fruitful. We looked at one photograph of his brother, sister-in-law and their son where they were all pulling a very similar funny face. The resemblance between the brother and son's expressions were quite marked even though both seemed unaware that the other was doing it. Unfortunately Andrew only wanted me to take photos of the photograph of himself and his daughters (I've attempted a pretty awful sketch of the 'lost' photograph in my notebook).

Legally, the photographer 'owns' the image (although this becomes less clear when applied to photographs of photographs or family photos where it is not always clear who took the photo) but researchers need to think about the moral implications of asking participants to provide consent for the use of the photographs they have in their homes. Think about whether all the people who appear in the photos (and the parents/guardians of children) need to be asked to consent before they can be used.

Practical implications of seeking consent from everyone

We originally considered seeking consent from all living people who appear in any photos we might want to publish. Ultimately however we decided to leave it up to the participants who had shown us the photos to decide whether they needed to ask permission from other family members before consenting to their publication (and although only Andrew (see box 1) raised this issue in the first phase of consent (for me to take a photo to use during analysis) a number of other participants did report wanting to consult others who appear in certain photographs before consenting for their photos to be used more widely).

There were a number of reasons why we decided to leave this decision up to participants that you may also want to consider:

- Obtaining the contact details of everyone who appears in photos is a huge administrative task that requires a great amount of time.
- It is unlikely that it will be possible to contact everyone and therefore it won't be possible to seek consent for all photos.
- There may be other ethical problems with contacting the family members of research participants who might not know anything about the project or even be on good terms with the participant.

4. Seeking consent image by image

It is crucial to give your participants the option of consenting to the use of photos in an image by image way. Our research showed that people often feel differently about providing consent for different images.

It's important to remember that some photos may have a particular poignancy or sensitivity to the participant, which you may not always be aware of and which might affect whether consent is given.



Some people felt differently about old and new photos.

Isabel talked about feeling she had no problem providing consent for photos of people who are no longer living but that before consenting to the publication of the other images she felt she would have to check with everyone who appeared in them first. Pauline felt the same and requested more time to contact her daughters and discuss it with them before signing her form.

For these reasons we attached a print out of all photographs with the consent form and gave participants the option of giving consent for us to use some, but not all, of their images. This can complicate the form so it is important to explain it in an accompanying letter as clearly as possible.



Download sample document from the toolkit page of our website:
Letter sent to participants



We gave our participants numbered copies of all photos so they could select which they would provide consent for

Some practical considerations:

- Although all our participants did fill in their form correctly, you may have to go and talk through the form with some participants in person and you should allow time for this.
- Try and post out your consent forms as soon as possible after your interview – this will make it easier if you do have to go back to some participants and increases the likelihood that your contact details are correct and that people will have a clear memory of taking part in the project and any verbal discussions about consent that you have already had.

The responses we got from our participants showed that people employ complex reasoning to these decisions and that having the opportunity to give consent for some but not all of their photos is fundamental to ethical practice:

Although Isabel and Pauline (see box on previous page) had felt confident giving consent for photos of deceased family members, for David and Marilyn images of older photos felt much more sensitive and private. Unlike Isabel and Pauline they were perfectly happy to give full consent for the use of photos of their grandchildren and children.

Summary – top tips

- Think about levels of consent. Ask yourself which levels of consent you need to seek, when you need to seek them and how formally you need to do this. Don't forget that you may not be aware of all the ways you will use the images in the future so be as inclusive as you can.
- If you are taking photographs of participant's photos at the end of the interview try and devise a system for keeping track of who is in the photos and at what point they were discussed in the interview. This will help you to match your photos to your interview transcript but bear in mind that some confusion may remain.
- Think about who has the right to consent (morally as well as legally) to the use of photographs and be sensitive to this when talking to participants about consent. Bear in mind however that there may be practical barriers to seeking consent from everyone who appears in an image.
- Our research highlighted the importance of giving people the option of consenting for some but not all of their photographs. Be mindful that this complicates the form and you may have to help some participants to complete it.

Feedback welcome! If you have any comments on this toolkit or if you can tell us how you have used it in your research or teaching please do drop us a line at realities@manchester.ac.uk and let us know.



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