Capturing City Dweller Aspirations Tool

Helene Joffe

This is a method for eliciting how people think and feel about social and personal issues. It is very well suited to people reflecting on their views and experiences of urban living. Termed the grid elaboration method (GEM), it is distinctive in tapping the naturalistic thoughts and feelings that people hold. A further aspect of the method is that it taps chains of association that are often emotive and implicit in nature. Thus the wellbeing/illbeing effects of various aspects of urban life can be successfully gauged via this method.
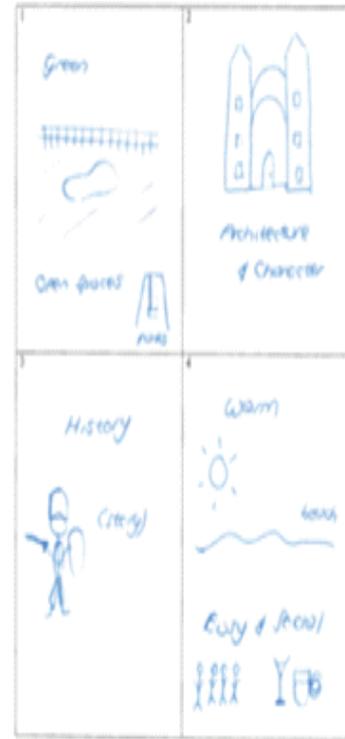
An examples of a London-based participant's free association grid that was used as the basis for the interview

Tool Contents

People are given a grid containing four empty boxes with an instruction above that directs them to write or draw their first thoughts about the phenomenon under investigation: in this case aspirations for themselves and for cities of the future. They then fill this in. Following this, the researcher interviews them using only the participants' own responses to structure the interview – so participants are asked to talk about each box in turn, with no injection of content from the researcher.

How has it been delivered?

It has appeared in a journal article that details how to perform the GEM, and also how one may go about analyzing the results.

Where has it been published?

Joffe, H. & Elsey, J. Free Association in Psychology and the Grid Elaboration Method. In Review of General Psychology, 2014, Vol. 18, No. 3, 173–185.

Who participated?

Members of the public in three UK cities matched in terms of age, gender, socio-economic status and ethnicity.

Levels of Usability/Testability

Helene Joffe has evolved this method over the past 15 years in a range of studies concerning how members of the public engage with various social issues. The method is rooted in a tradition that is used in various psychological fields. It is particularly useful as an instrument to compare different groups' aspirations, particularly when implemented with matched samples from the different contexts one wishes to compare. It produces a naturalistic, participant-led vision of aspirational cities.

Liveable Cities

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