



Methods for Change

## **Collage as Method**

Dr Amy Barron,  
*The University of Manchester*

*Corresponding author*  
Dr Amy Barron  
[amy.barron@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:amy.barron@manchester.ac.uk)

# Collage as Method

---



*The Collage method involves creating a visual representation of a topic through the assembling of materials on to a backing. These materials (which might include paper, printed images, words, textile pieces stitched onto a fabric, photographs, found materials, or a combination of all of these) are arranged in a way that is meaningful to whoever is creating the collage: this can be the participant or researcher.*

Collage can be used as means of data collection whereby the researcher might ask questions about the research topic and the composition of materials as the participant creates their collage. If collaging is completed with several participants, observing and asking questions about qualities such as the layering of colours and the repetition and juxtaposition of materials can illuminate similarities and differences between participants.

Collage can also be used in the process of [data analysis](#) whereby the researcher gathers materials collated over the course of a research project (transcripts, photographs, archives, newspaper cuttings and other types of mixed media) and creates a collage from them to make sense of the materials. By using collaging in this way, a participatory dimension can be introduced into the process of analysis, whereby the researcher and participants create a collage and make sense of the materials together. The resulting collage can be used as a 'way in' to exploring a topic with other participants or to communicate ideas to different audiences. Collage is an accessible method that can be used to prompt conversations with people of varying abilities, in group activities, or one to one.



## How does Collage create or contribute to change?

The collage method can provide an in-depth understanding of people's life experiences, perspectives and thoughts about a given topic. These findings could be used to persuade, to tell a story about those issues, or to create change. Indeed, change can occur at any point in the research process when using the collage method. Change may occur before the collage is created while the researcher or participant is selecting the materials to be included in the collage. While collating materials, the person who is creating the collage might begin to reflect on what matters to them regarding the topic being explored. Change can happen while the collage is being created as participants and researchers learn new things through the process of making. It is in the 'decision-making stages' (where participants decide which materials to include and exclude, or how to layer or position them) where change happens as participants contemplate how to visually represent the topic being researched. Change can also happen after the collage is complete as the participants and researcher observe and discuss the final piece. If the collage is shared with wider stakeholders (whether physically or as part of a report or presentation), then the stories, lives and experiences represented can have the capacity to shift what is deemed to be significant or important.

## What ideas or concepts influence this approach?

The use of collage as a social science research method is influenced by the advent of surrealism in art in the early 20th century. Surrealism is a style in art and literature in which ideas, images and objects are combined in a strange way, like a dream. Much like we might think of collage today, surrealism is characterised by a spirit of spontaneity and often consists of illogical juxtapositions and distorted shapes. The aim of surrealism was to disregard convention; to challenge dominant cultural narratives; and to comment on political and social issues. Slightly later, in the 1960s, collage was used as a form of Pop Art whereby newspaper and magazine photographs were amalgamated to represent popular culture in a creative way.

It was in the latter half of the 20th century when collaging techniques really began to be used both within and beyond the academy as a means of representing the complex and fragmented experiences of individuals and communities. For instance, collaging is now widely used as 'art therapy' for mental wellbeing. The method provides a supportive structure while offering enough freedom for autonomy, making it suitable for exploring difficult topics. Organisations have used collage to explore and express their mission or culture, and as a way of facilitating communication across different departments. Within the academy, collage is used by a wide range of disciplines, including education, psychology, sociology, and geography to explore increasingly diverse topics. For instance, collaging has recently been used by Geographers to explore [ageing and dementia friendly communities](#). Social scientists now use collage as a creative and innovative way to collect, analyse, interpret and represent data.



## Why might I want to use Collage?

- The multi-media nature of collaging means that it can help in structuring, developing, analysing, and presenting issues or experiences which might be difficult to express through the spoken or written word alone. Because the researcher and participant can think through shape characteristics, colour palette and composition together, collage is an ideal method to explore difficult or sensitive topics. This is because the participant and researcher are focusing together on the creation of the collage and not on a one-to-one interaction. Focusing on the artistic choices being made means that participants can gradually communicate their feelings and express themselves while the researcher asks about underlying reasons or motivations
- Working with different materials means that the collage method stimulates the imagination and encourages reflection. This can help participants and the researcher to see new connections and possibilities in ways which might not be possible when using more traditional research methods in isolation, such as interviewing. Exploring these connections and possibilities makes collage a suitable method for problem-solving.
- The versatile nature of collage (that the final piece can take a more abstract form or be used to clearly tell a story) makes it an accessible method that can appeal to participants with different backgrounds, needs and abilities. This includes those who are confident in their creative abilities and those who are less confident.
- The visual and creative nature of collaging can help researchers to gain new insights and understandings into complex and fragmented experiences and perspectives. For example, participatory collaging could be used in community-based research as a means of involving community members in the research process. Through the creation of collages, community members can share their experiences, perspectives, and knowledge in a way that is inclusive and empowering. Researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of different experiences and perspectives by asking questions about the composition of participants' collages and by reflecting on the topics of conversations prompted by the activity.



## Step by step guide to using Collage:

**1. Recruit participants.** There are numerous avenues to participant recruitment. Because collage can be built into existing activities, it might make sense to recruit participants through established community groups, community meetups, library sessions or family activities. Alternatively, participants might be recruited by sharing posters about the research around a given community, in newspapers or online.

*It is important to ensure that collage is an appropriate method in relation to your research aims and questions. If you are interested in clean-cut or generalisable results, then collage is perhaps not the most suitable method. Collage is useful when you want to better understand people's qualitative experiences and understandings on a given topic.*

**2. Select an appropriate venue.** It is important that the participants and researcher are comfortable when collaging, and this can be helped by securing a suitable venue. This could be a community facility, such as a community hall. If the collage is completed with an individual, it might be appropriate to collage in their home. If this is the case, or in any case, follow appropriate [research ethics guidance](#). Collage can generally be accommodated in different kinds of spaces, but there might be cases where you require specific tools, equipment, or facilities (such as running water for painting).

**3. Create the right atmosphere.** Before collaging begins, it might be a good idea to set the room up with the materials you will use to create the collage. Make sure you provide clear instructions to the participants to either bring materials with them or explain that you will provide them. While the nature of the materials used will vary depending on the research project; it is generally a good idea to provide large pieces of paper or a poster board for creating the collage, scissors, glue or tape, and some other materials in case participants have forgotten and so you do not run out.

*Collaging can use a large variety of materials. These might include photographs (provided by the researcher, participant or sourced online together while collaging), coloured pens, paints and paper, fabrics, textured papers, objects, magazine cuttings and leaflets. The nature of these materials will be shaped by the aims of the research.*

**4. Begin collaging.** It might be a good idea to remind the participant of the purpose of the collaging activity at this point and to reiterate how the finished collage will be used. Whilst the participant begins sorting through the different materials, the researcher can begin to ask questions about the topic being explored. This initial conversation can be used as a 'way in' to begin collaging whereby participants select photographs, cut out images, words and phrases that reflect their experiences and start to arrange them on paper.



*It is up to you how structured the collaging activity is, and this will be shaped by what you are interested in finding out. The researcher may ask participants to respond to specific questions whilst collaging, or the activity could be more open ended whereby the participant completes the collage in their own time, leaving the researcher to interpret the finished piece alone. If working with participants who would prefer to not meet in person, participants could be asked to keep a diary or reflective notes for the researcher.*

- 5. Reflect.** Whether completed with an individual, as part of a group, or alone, it is important to encourage participants to reflect on the reasons why they are arranging the materials as they are. It is these decision-making processes, along with making a note of any cross-cutting themes and patterns that emerge, which can reveal what is important to the participant or the community more generally.
- 6. Reflect again.** When the collage is finished, take a moment to reflect on the process of creating the collage. Did the participant learn anything new about the topic being explored whilst creating the collage? This stage could be completed as a group whereby participants are asked to observe each other's collages and to comment on the differences and similarities therein. At this point, the researcher could either interject with questions where appropriate or observe.
- 7. Share.** Collaging creates a visual product which represents what matters to the participant in relation to the topic being explored. The collage could be shared with community groups, policy makers or other stakeholders. With permission, photographs could be taken of the collages which could be used as a visual aid in reports or presentations, or as a 'way in' to exploring a topic with another group of people. The collages could be kept as standalone pieces, or they could be incorporated to form a collective piece, such as a larger scale artwork to be shared either physically or digitally through social media or in a zine.



## An example of Collage in social science research

### Understanding sense of place in older age: the neighbourhood and memory

#### Researcher:

*Dr Amy Barron, The University of Manchester*

This exploratory piece of research aimed to scope the potential of arts-based methods for researching the everyday experiences of older people, with a particular focus on memory. Working with eight self-identified older people aged 55-89 over a two-month period (June to July 2016) in Chorlton, a suburb of Manchester, I wanted to develop a novel and participatory approach to engaging with older people. I did this using the creative research methods of [Photo go-alongs](#) and collage with a view of developing a more substantive research project using a creative and participatory approach. Collaging was used primarily as a facilitation technique: a means to encourage organic discussion and to get at the messy and often performed nature of memory, place, and identity construction practices.

More specifically, I intended to assess the capacities of these methods when researching the 'more-than-representational' aspects of place experience in older age. By 'more-than-representational', I refer to those aspects of life which are difficult to represent (such as memories, hopes, desires, fears and so on) which are often overlooked or dismissed in academic and policy-based research with older people as being too 'messy' or nuanced to be of use. The point of this research, though, was to draw out the different ways older age is experienced, and so the detailed and rich data these methods can create made sense.

This research took place against the backdrop of an increasingly urban, older population. At the time, the World Health Organisation's Age-Friendly Cities and Communities initiative was gaining traction across the world, and there was a growing appetite for social science research that explored the varied lives of older people. I walked around Chorlton with the participants as they shared places of significance with me and took photographs. The routes traversed were mapped using the App 'Map My Walk' and were layered to visually represent the different journeys. A group-based collaging activity was then facilitated with all eight participants, and I used a printed version of the layered routes on an A3 sheet as an initial stimulus for group discussion.

For the collaging activity, a selection of coloured pens, post-it notes, stickers and glue were placed on the table along with the A3 sheet of paper showing the mapped routes ahead of the participants joining (Figure 1).



*Figure 1 Figure to show the collaging activity, author's own.*



# Collage as Method



Each participant was then provided with a file containing colour photographs that they had taken. Following a brief reflective discussion of the walking activity, participants were given 10 minutes to browse their photos before selecting the three they deemed to be most significant. Each participant then shared these three photographs with the group. The group first offered their reflections and interpretations on other participants' photographs before the participant who took the photo shared their reasons for taking it. This process was then repeated. Whilst discussing, participants collaged their images and added any other thoughts using the post-it notes and pens.

The collage began to depict diverse and overlapping memories and experiences. Asking the participants to reflect in the group context on why they had taken the photographs highlighted the fluidity of memory, and how memories are re-crafted and re-worked in relation to the situations in which we find ourselves. The use of artistic, tactile modes of communication (writing, cutting, sticking) fostered a sense of involvement and encouraged free-flowing conversation between the participants. During this time, I could listen to the similarities and differences not only between each participant, but between what the same participant had said on the walking activity versus the collaging activity.

Following completion of the research, the collage was used as part of a co-produced presentation of the research findings as part of the Annual General Meeting for the community group from which the participants volunteered. Whilst creating the collage, participants shared how they were enjoying the creative process.

Collaging meant that participants shared stories and memories with each other which they may not otherwise have done. The activity fostered a sense of cohesion as the group were creating something together. The collage was then given to the community group to display (Figure 2).

While I did not share the collage beyond the community group in this instance, the collage could have been shared with local counsellors, housing associations and other local policy communities who are interested in creating more 'age-friendly' neighbourhoods. The layered nature of the collage could aid in better understanding the complex and overlapping meanings older residents associated with places. This nuanced understanding could inform the creation of age-inclusive developments or regeneration plans.



Figure 2: Figure to show the completed collage, author's own.





## Where else could Collage be used?

Collaging can be a useful research method in a variety of contexts where researchers are looking to gain a deeper understanding of complex and fragmented experiences and perspectives. For instance, collage could be used in any type of community-based research as a means of involving community members in the research process alongside other stakeholders such as organisational representatives and researchers. Through the creation of collages, community members can share their experiences, perspectives, and knowledge in a way that is inclusive and empowering. Collaging can highlight different opinions on a topic or proposed development in a community, or to think through solutions to a problem facing a community in a creative and collaborative way. Given the flexible, accessible and inclusive nature of this method, collage can work well with people who have different needs and creative abilities, including with children.

Collaging could also be used in the context of health research to explore patients' experiences of illness, treatment, and recovery. Here, collaging could be used as a form of ['life-mapping'](#), providing patients with a way to visually piece together and represent their experiences over time. Collaging might be particularly useful for those wanting to explore the mental wellbeing of participants. It is well documented that creating collages can help participants to [work through experiences of trauma](#). These experiences can then be shared with researchers and healthcare providers who can use them to improve organisational structures or health care plans.

## Top tips

1. If the participant is making the collage, remind them that the goal is not necessarily to create something aesthetically pleasing. Often, the process of collaging can be confusing and messy, but it is precisely the working through, assembling and reassembling of different materials which makes collaging so interesting as a research method.
2. Keep the aim of your research in mind but try to not be too strict with the parameters of the project. Be open to the possibility that in revealing new connections and possibilities, collaging might reshape the original scope of a project.
3. Remember that collage is a versatile research method. It can be used as a means of data collection, analysis, and representation. Collage can be used in combination with other qualitative (and quantitative) methods, and it can be used with an individual, or with groups.



## Further reading

- Balmer, A. (2021). Painting with data: Alternative aesthetics of qualitative research. *The Sociological Review*, 69(6), pp.1143-1161. Available at: [journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/003802612199178791512](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/003802612199178791512)
- Barron, A. (2021). More-than-representational approaches to the life-course, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 22:5, 603-626. Available at: [tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14649365.2019.1610486](https://tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14649365.2019.1610486)
- Barron, A. (2022). Beyond Older Age: Approaches to Understand the Diverse Lives of Older People. The University of Manchester Library. Available: <http://amycbarron.com/beyondolderage/>
- The Collage Research Network. (2023). Available: <https://collageresearchnetwork.wordpress.com/>
- Williams, A. (2023). What Remains? Salvaging Meaning from “Dementia Friendly Communities” Using Cut-Ups and Collage. *GeoHumanities*, pp.1-21. Available at: [tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2373566X.2022.2150260](https://tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2373566X.2022.2150260)

### **To reference:**

Barron, A. (2023) ‘Collage as Method’ in Rodekirchen, M., Pottinger, L. Briggs, A., Barron, A., Eseonu, T., Hall, S. and Browne, A.L. (eds.) *Methods for Change Volume 2: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems*. Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester.



**To read about more exciting social science methods, the full range of Methods for Change ‘how-to’ guides can be found here.**