

Edited by Paula Reavey



# A Handbook of Visual Methods in Psychology

Using and Interpreting Images in  
Qualitative Research

SECOND EDITION



# A HANDBOOK OF VISUAL METHODS IN PSYCHOLOGY

This comprehensive volume explores the set of theoretical, methodological, ethical and analytical issues that shape the ways in which visual qualitative research is conducted in psychology. Using visual data such as film making, social media analyses, photography and model making, the book uniquely uses visual qualitative methods to broaden our understanding of experience and subjectivity.

In recent years, visual research has seen a growing emphasis on the importance of culture in experience-based qualitative methods. Featuring contributors from diverse research backgrounds, including narrative psychology, personal construct theory and psychoanalysis, the book examines the potential for visual methods in psychology. In each chapter of the book, the contributors explore and address how a visual approach has contributed to existing social and psychological theory in their line of research.

The book provides up-to-date insights into combining methods to create new multi-modal methodologies, and analyses these with psychology-specific questions in mind. It covers topics such as sexuality, identity, group processes, child development, forensic psychology, race and gender, and would be the ideal companion for those studying or undertaking research in disciplines like psychology, sociology and gender studies.

**Paula Reavey** is Professor of Psychology and Mental Health at London South Bank University, UK, and Director of Research and Education for the Design in Mental Health Network, UK. She has used a variety of visual-qualitative methods to examine lived experiences of memory, mental health and distress.

# PRAISE FOR THE PREVIOUS EDITION

*'A Handbook of Visual Methods in Psychology* establishes a major contribution to the growing body of theories on visual methods in psychology. ... The reader is presented with a great diversity of practices and methods of visual data ... [which] expands our understanding of the broad range of possibilities, constraints and of caveats that are involved in visual practices in research methodology. ... The overall composition of the book is framed as an interpretive guideline by the editor, that enables students, practitioners, researchers and scientists easy access to the content. ... The wide-ranging content of this work offers a diverse spectrum of empirical studies and theories about the intrinsic strengths of visual approaches in psychology research methods that could be invaluable to social work educators and students.'

– Kees J.M. Van Haaster, Utrecht University of Applied Sciences,  
the Netherlands, in *The International Journal for Social Work  
and Social Care Education*

'This book brings something genuinely new to the rapidly growing field of visual research. In fact, as a collection it provides a real step change in our understanding of the nature, the roles and the potential of visual research methods.'

– Alan Bryman, Professor of Organizational and Social Research,  
The University of Leicester, UK

'The scope of this text is impressive. It spans a good range of approaches to analysis and theoretical approaches, and covers an engaging array of areas of psychology. What is really commendable is the interpretive framework provided by the editor in framing why and how visual materials have now – eventually – come into use within psychological research. This makes it a very welcome volume that addresses a current gap in methodological debates within psychology.'

– Erica Burman, Professor of Education, University of Manchester, UK

# A HANDBOOK OF VISUAL METHODS IN PSYCHOLOGY

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Qualitative Research

Second Edition

*Edited by Paula Reavey*

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**This book is lovingly dedicated to the memory of Professor  
Marcia Worrell (1966–2020).**

**A truly inspiring scholar, activist, educator and cherished  
colleague and friend to so many.**



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# FOREWORD

*Carla Willig*

It is my pleasure to introduce this long-awaited second edition of *Visual Methods in Psychology*. In my foreword to the first edition back in 2011, I wrote that the book constituted a timely and very welcome response to a noticeable lack of accommodation of ‘the visual’ in contemporary qualitative psychology. Since then, visual methods have become much more widely used and better understood within the discipline, a development to which Paula Reavey has contributed significantly. Paula is one of a small number of qualitative psychologists who have been promoting the creative potential of visual approaches for quite some time, seeking to remove the study of everyday experience from ‘the grip of language-based methodologies’, as she so appropriately put it in the introduction to the first edition. I have very fond memories of working with Paula within the context of our Embodiment Research Group (which we set up together with Val Gillies, Angela Harden, Katherine Johnson and Vicky Strange in 1999) when we were trying to find ways of transcending discourse-based analyses of accounts of embodied experience. In our six years of working together, we grappled with many of the questions which Paula went on to tackle in her later work, which were addressed in the first edition of this book and which are now tackled with a considerable degree of sophistication in the second edition. How we would have appreciated a book like this at the time ...

The second edition of *Visual Methods in Psychology* contains 12 new chapters, thus expanding the book’s coverage of the diverse ways in which visual data can be used to study lived experience. Given the rapid growth in the use of social media and various apps over the last few years, this is exactly what is needed, and I look forward to further iterations of this important book. As Paula Reavey writes in the introductory chapter, ‘[w]hen we take seriously how people’s experiences are made and the contexts in which they emerge, it becomes difficult to ignore the rich complex of visual media through which experiences come into being’.

This book brings together a wide range of examples of how visual data can be gathered and analysed in order to enrich our understanding of meaning making and

## *Foreword*

experience. It demonstrates how psychological concerns such as emotions, identity, memory, embodied states and practices can be explored through visual data and how these can add to our understanding of human experience. Whilst the book promotes and celebrates visual approaches, the contributors do not shy away from engaging with the ethical, conceptual, theoretical and methodological challenges of such work. They raise fascinating questions about the status and ownership of images, and the process of their production and interpretation. What I like very much about this book is the way in which the chapters provide a wide range of different perspectives from which to approach visual methodologies. Each chapter offers a different ‘way in’ to using images as data. The chapters communicate a sense of shared purpose as well as an acknowledgement of the very significant differences between approaches. As such, the book inspires the reader and creates a sense of excitement which comes from opening up a whole new set of possibilities for qualitative research.

Carla Willig is Professor of Psychology at City University, London.

# PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

It is over a decade since I began work on the first edition of *A Handbook of Visual Methods in Psychology* and a great deal has changed, including my own relationship to visual methods. I have become more enamoured with, as well as critical of, the possibilities for using this rich yet troubling approach to the study of the psychological. More people than ever are using visual methods – across countries and continents – and the second edition of this volume highlights some important differences in the field, both in terms of subject areas and perspective, in order to reflect the diversity of this developing methodology.

As with the first edition, the aim of the volume is to provide comprehensive coverage of visual methods in psychology, but here included are several new chapters on recent work within psychology, examining social psychological life beyond the spoken word: work on emotions and affect, materiality, environments and space, virtual worlds and group dynamics. This second edition then truly represents emerging work in qualitative research that goes beyond verbal data, extending the psychological by acknowledging the affective and material components of meaning making and lived experience.

Unlike other popular volumes on visual methods within the social sciences, this collection examines *social practices* or *cultural life* and takes seriously what it means to investigate the *psychological*. And by psychological, not just the *psychoanalytic* – the psy-perspective often covered in volumes on visual methods (see Rose, 2016). Here, a broad range of perspectives informing contemporary psychological approaches are included: phenomenology, process thought, social identity theory, feminist psychology and social constructionism, with the united aim of making sense of the rich texture of lived experience, interaction and meaning making – in real and virtual contexts. As the use of visual media increases globally, so does its impact on our psychic life. This new edition examines the impact of these new technologies, with respect to self-making, gender, sexuality, distress and memory and other psychological aspects of public and private life.

### *Preface to the Second Edition*

This second edition also covers new visual work with stakeholders and the possibilities of working more creatively with participants to promote democracy in the research process. Co-production in research – where people using health, social or community services are strongly encouraged to be involved in research development and visual methods – is now considered a valid means through which to engage people in more creative and participatory ways.

As you explore this new edition, you will begin to see that visual methods in psychology have reached a new level of maturity. When I compiled the first edition, some qualitative researchers were anxious about adopting an approach deemed too risky to be considered legitimate. A decade later, funding has been awarded to visual researchers in psychology; their work is published in high-quality medical and psychology journals and is generally making much more of a clinical and academic impact – a situation considered unthinkable only a very short time ago ...

Paula Reavey  
London, 2020

### **References**

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My work on visual methods has never been a solo project, as I have had the privilege of collaborating with a range of wonderful academics, people who use mental health services, experts by experience and students. I would like to thank students from the University of Padua, Italy, the University of Aalborg and the University of Aarhus in Denmark and the University of Neuchatel, Switzerland, who participated in postgraduate visual methods workshops. I am grateful to Brady Wagoner, Morten Nissen, Line Lerche Morck and Tania Zittoun (TZ) for inviting me to teach in such super locations, with such lovely people. I also wish to thank Steve Brown for his continued collegiality, critical but constructive challenges and his general all-round support and input into my thinking and general wellbeing. Eternal gratitude to my London South Bank University (LSBU) PhD students, who put up with my flights of fancy and always contribute to my scholarship: Richard Batty, James Binnie, Sarah Bogle, Serina Fuller, Katharine Harding, Seth Hunter and Rai Waddingham.

It is also no small thing that my colleagues at King's College London have invited me to join funded projects using visual methods, and have taken a risk with this marginal qualitative method, having recognised its potential for working more democratically and creatively with people who experience distress. I am grateful in particular to Dennis Ougrin – a forward-thinking and progressive psychiatrist and academic who I feel privileged to work with.

Finally, much love to my family, Alex, Oskar and Viktor. My security, sanity and overall joy rest with you and our three black cats.

# CONTRIBUTORS

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**Meg-John Barker** is the author of a number of popular books on sex, gender and relationships, including *Queer: A Graphic History* and *Gender: A Graphic Guide* (with Jules Scheele), *How To Understand Your Gender* and *Life Isn't Binary* (with Alex Iantaffi), *Enjoy Sex (How, When, and IF You Want To)* (with Justin Hancock), *Rewriting the Rules* and *The Psychology of Sex*. They also work as a one-to-one writing mentor, as a creative consultant on various projects, and speak and train on gender, sexual and relationship diversity. They are half of the Meg-John and Justin podcast (megjohnandjustin.com) and blog and publish zines and comics on rewriting-the-rules.com. They regularly speak on their areas of expertise in the media, including on Radio 4, in *Cosmo*, and being featured in the *Independent on Sunday Rainbow List*. They were an academic psychologist and United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)-accredited therapist for many years before focusing on writing full-time.

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**Steven D. Brown** is Professor of Health and Organizational Psychology at Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University. His research interests are around social remembering amongst 'vulnerable' groups and service user experiences of mental health care. He is author of *Vital Memory and Affect* (with Paula Reavey, Routledge, 2015), *Psychology without Foundations* (with Paul Stenner, Sage, 2009) and *The Social Psychology of Experience* (with David Middleton, Sage, 2005).

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## Contributors

**Rose Capdevila** is a Senior Lecturer and Director of Research in the School of Psychology at the Open University. Her research looks at the boundaries around identity, particularly gender and political identities. She has published on social media, health and mothering as well as the role and politics of methodology in psychology. She has co-edited a number of books, including *Handbook of International Feminisms: Perspectives on Psychology, Women, Culture, and Rights* (Springer, 2011). Her current research explores how people make sense of and curate their identities and communities on- and offline and the implications of this for their everyday experience and practice. She co-edits the international journal *Feminism & Psychology* and is an active member of the British Psychological Society.

**Angela Cassidy** is a Lecturer in the Centre for Rural Policy Research, Department of Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology, University of Exeter. Her research interests include: public scientific controversies; science, expertise and policy; interdisciplinarity; and agri/environmental social science. She has investigated these issues through a series of case studies, including the history of UK debates over bovine tuberculosis and badger culling; 'One Health' (the convergence of human and animal health); food risk; and popular evolutionary psychology.

She initially studied the natural sciences before training as a postgraduate in the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh. She then conducted postdoctoral research at institutions including King's College London, University of East Anglia and the University of Leeds. She joined the University of Exeter in 2016, and is chair of the UK-wide Science in Public Research Network, which connects researchers and professionals in science engagement and communication.

**Lilliana Del Busso** is Professor of Social Work at Østfold University College (OUC), Norway. Her research interests are in the fields of psychosocial studies and critical psychology, and include embodiment, reflexivity, space, emotion and qualitative research methodologies. Del Busso has published original research and methodological papers in the fields of child protection, psychological medicine and critical social psychology. She is currently working on a project, in collaboration with researchers at the International Centre for Research and Policy on Childhood in Brazil and researchers at OUC, which explores the use of visual methodologies with children in relation to their everyday embodied and material contexts and participation in local governance.

**Mark Finn** teaches psychology at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, specialising in qualitative psychology.

**Michael Forrester** is a Reader in Psychology at the University of Kent and his academic interests are in child development and language (particularly children's developing conversational skills). He also has interests in psychoanalysis and in the development of musicality during childhood. Over recent years he has had a particular concern with the advancement of qualitative methods in undergraduate psychology teaching. Recent publications include *Early Social Interaction: A Case Comparison of*

## Contributors

*Developmental Pragmatics and Psychoanalytic Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2015) and *Doing Qualitative Research in Psychology: A Practical Guide* (SAGE, 2011).

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**Karen Henwood** is a Professor in the Cardiff School of Social Sciences. Her main research interests are in the qualitative, social scientific study of risk and uncertainty (environmental, social and technical), relationships and identities (including intergenerational) and the dynamics of environmental and sociocultural change. She has a longstanding interest in the use of visual methods in qualitative psychology, using them extensively to engage local communities with issues of risk and identity and to explore science and society issues. Her funded projects include: 'Masculinities, Identities and Risk' (Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Timescapes study, 2007–2012); 'Energy Biographies' study (ESRC/Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), 2011–2016); social science work package investigating 'Flexible, Integrated Energy Systems Change' (European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Flexis project, 2016–2021); and 'Lived experiences of energy vulnerability and fuel poverty' (collaborative project with the Energy Systems Catapult and Welsh Government within their respective Fair Futures/Smart Living programmes, 2018–2019). She is also in the later stages of conducting a walking tours and photo-elicitation study of coastal protection and the wellbeing values of nature (Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), Coastweb).

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Photovoice methodology as a participatory action research tool that can raise consciousness and mobilise community groups into social action. Her research has been recognised by the International Society for Political Psychology through the Erik Erikson Award for 2018. Before joining UCT, Shose worked in the development sector in the area of reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, development finance and programme evaluation. She completed her PhD in 2010 in Organizational and Social Psychology at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and joined UCT in 2011. Shose was the UCT Mandela fellow at the WEB Du Bois Research Institute, Hutchins Center, Harvard University for 2014 and visiting scholar in the Department of Behavioural and Psychological Sciences at the LSE in 2017. She is currently Interim Dean of the Humanities Faculty at UCT.

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**Maria Pini** has written and published extensively on youth and femininity. She completed her PhD at Goldsmiths College, London. Her book, *Club Cultures and Female Subjectivity*, is based on this research. Having completed her PhD, she took up a post-doctoral fellowship at the University of Western Australia where, in the Department of Critical Psychology, she worked on the video diary part of the 4/21 project. Due to ill health, she no longer works in academia.

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# INTRODUCTION

*Paula Reavey*

You who look at everything through your perpetually open eyes, is your lucidity never bathed in tears?

(Serres, 2008/2016, p. 52)

We never just ‘see’ images. And images are far from literal reflections of some social practice or inner life. As Serres suggests, the act of looking is always subject to our sensorial engagement in the world, our physical entanglements, affective and embodied engagement with others or the igniting of other senses and forms of knowledge. Seeing is thus enmeshed in a plurality of ways of being and meaning-making practice. Though this volume is about ‘the visual’, the concern is with how to combine visual methods with other forms of knowing, so as to better capture lived experience as it unfolds as part of our broader ecology (Brown and Reavey, 2015). When we see, we see from particular locations, through the lens of our personal and/or collective *lived embodied* history, and from diverse cultural and social ecologies. The eyes we use to read images thus require situating in a current location, process, mode of being: the eye is for crying, blinking, winking, sleeping as much as it is for ‘seeing’. What Serres argues for is a fundamental multi-modality in regard to the senses, but he is further trying to make lived experience the basis of knowing. Following Serres, this volume is an attempt to explore this form of multi-modality.

Images are powerful forms of communication, signs which form a vital part of our everyday worlds and lived experience. Personal images can hold the most potent signs: images of people we have loved and lost; images of ourselves that intercept our memories in joyous, ambiguous, troubling ways. They invite us to look, as much as they can incite us to look away. Public images communicate how we ought to look and feel and what we ‘see’ as normal or, at least, desirable and social life bustles along using images in complex ways. Educators, health advisors, drug companies and the

fitness industry all use images to sell their ideas and promote their services; urban spaces are replete with images, which promote corporate, social and political messages that penetrate our minds and bodies, without our conscious *seeing* at times.

In recent times, the emergence of innovative technologies has opened up new forms of personal and public communication and social interaction: new ways of self-relating and self-presenting, transforming the way we engage with others and our position in the world more broadly. Social networking sites have given rise to alternative forms of seeing, communication and mediation, where thoughts, feelings and identities are expressed and performed in online verbal-visual synthesis. In disciplines other than psychology, these emerging forms of communication have long been recognised as crucial nodes in the formation and performance of identity, embodiment and subjectivity. In psychology, the recognition is more recent and somewhat limited, though since the publication of the first version of this volume, visual methods have grown in popularity and acceptance by the mainstream (Frith *et al.*, 2005; Reavey and Johnson, 2008; Reavey and Prosser, 2012).

## Background

In the social sciences, visual research has grown significantly over the past 30 years, in part due to a growing emphasis on the importance of culture and cultural practices in making sense of human experience (Evans and Hall, 1999; Pink, 2007; Prosser, 2006). One of the major concerns for those working within psychology is how such cultural practices, including visual practices, impact on how people *experience* the world they live in. A growing emphasis on experience-based qualitative methods (our actual encounter with or exposure to something – how it is felt, is seen, the space in which it occurs as opposed to how it is described) as opposed to *discourse* (written or spoken informal interactions or a formal kind of debate) has the authors in this volume searching for alternative forms of data and analytical procedures (Brown *et al.*, 2009).

We encounter images constantly in the ongoing flow of experience, for they constitute a vital part of the existing cultural resources we have to make sense of our lives. Visual anthropologists have recognised this for quite some time, making clear distinctions between thinking and speaking about different cultural systems and the rich experiential texture of those systems (Banks, 2006). We are so much more than we say we are, as we inhabit a world saturated with images, sounds and smells that enter our conscious and unconscious experience. When listening to the news, reading magazines and communicating via the web through social networking sites such as Facebook, Snapchat or Instagram, images mediate our experience of the information being presented and the persons we are exchanging/interacting with. Traditionally, psychology has confined its use of images to children or those deemed less 'able' to communicate thoughts and feelings, rather than those who use more supposedly sophisticated expressive modes such as language. In this sense, the status of the 'visual' has often been viewed as a more naïve or simplistic form of communication, despite there being no simple or

uniform way to read it (Wakefield and Underwager, 2006; Boden, Larkin, and Iyer, 2018). However, as the works in this volume demonstrate, the way in which we use the visual is far from naïve, simple or uniform.

### Multi-modal accounts

Qualitative researchers in psychology have written volumes on how to collect and analyse ‘textual data’ (the spoken word usually), without sufficient attention to the wider variety of modalities that surround us (visual, verbal, bodily, audio, spatial). An attention to multi-modal communication thus embraces description of different types of psychological activities, environmental spaces and cultural artefacts – including the spaces that either encourage our agency or restrict us, the objects we touch and reminisce with and through and the sounds we hear that create emotional resonances. Multi-modality is a complex interplay between various meaning-making resources that are part of our experience and a key way in which we communicate those experiences to others. This may include the use of photographic material in remembering people or events, in the use of visual markers when describing how we experience our bodies and to locate our experiences by presenting or *showing* the spaces in which they emerge. When we take seriously how people’s experiences are made and the contexts in which they emerge, it becomes difficult to ignore the rich complex of visual media through which experiences come into being.

And yet, images are never used or read in any straightforward or ‘correct’ way. They are polysemous and open to multiple interpretations and readings. Images are part of culturally available signs, interdependent with language conventions and cultural practice (Forrester, 2002). The sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997) argued that images do not contain a true or singular meaning, but are constantly subject to interpretation and re-interpretation, depending on specific personal, social and cultural conditions. Following this, the authors in this volume are concerned with how participants interpret and create images to say and represent something about their lives. This process is inherently interpretive and situated and it is our task as visual researchers in psychology to work with these multiple interpretations and settings in which lived experience is located.

This volume seeks to provide further discussion and debate about the use and interpretation of visual media in psychology, including the use and interpretation of paintings, photographs, graphic design, models, social media and film in a variety of community, academic and therapeutic settings. More specifically, many of the authors attempt to address theoretical issues through the use of visual methods, such as the role of embodiment and emotions in experience, or the variety of spaces within which our experiences converge. Images already circulating in wider culture, or the images that participants produce themselves, are never ‘innocent’ or ‘a-cultural’ (Rose, 2007). They are always already situated in various cultural practices, knowledges, technologies and power regimes. Just as language systems produce subject positions and hierarchies, so do images. As Haraway (1991) notes: *who* is seen, *how* they are seen and *who* is viewing are all part of social power relations producing specific versions/visions of social hierarchies. The authors thus share this



‘critical visuality’ where the meanings of images are never taken for granted or seen as either neutral or reflections of the ‘real’.

What makes the focus of this volume ever more psychological, however, is the emphasis on participants’ constructions of meaning from the images given or produced. Emotions, personal narrative, embodied states and practices and identity formation are central to the way in which the combination of verbal and visual data is read by the contributors. And a variety of psychology-related topics, such as memory, child development, emotion, distress, appearance, intimacy, powerlessness, gender and sexuality, embodiment and social identity form the basis for these discussions relating to psychological theory and method.

### **Aims of the volume**

This volume aims to make visible the set of theoretical, methodological, as well as ethical and analytical issues that shape the ways in which visual qualitative research is conducted in psychology. However, the aim is not to expose as inadequate other qualitative methods that prioritise verbal language. All of the authors combine both verbal and visual data in their work in a wholly integrative way, emphasising the multi-modal nature of experience, which researchers and participants alike are called on to access during the course of research.

As well as describing the research process itself (including the methodological and analytical aspects of the research), many of the chapters illustrate the attempt by psychologists to engage individuals in more *participatory* forms of research. Authors writing in the section on ‘shared visions’, for example, discuss in detail how participants with a range of social, health and mental health challenges are provided the opportunity to adopt a more creative and agentic role in the research process. This is especially important for groups, traditionally silenced and/or rendered passive recipients of researchers’ psychological modes of measurement. Furthermore, all authors in the volume acknowledge the set of theoretical, methodological or ethical difficulties encountered during the course of their work. This volume is not a naïve attempt to herald the virtues of visual approaches in psychology, but rather aims to explore in a heuristic fashion, the potential use of these approaches in a critically engaged way. Thus, the emerging issues that each of the authors encounter in using visual approaches will be summarised and discussed throughout the volume.

### **Organisation of the volume**

The contributors to this volume work within a variety of traditions within psychology – narrative psychology, personal construct theory, psychogeography, process philosophy and thought, hermeneutic and interpretative phenomenological analysis, discursive psychology, conversation analysis and psychoanalysis – to inform the kinds of research questions they ask and the subsequent interpretations they form. Each addresses how and why they chose a particular visual approach and how it contributes to existing social/psychological theory, as well as clearly outlining how they carried out their specific research project.

## Introduction

The sources of verbal data that combine with the visual approach throughout this volume are qualitative rather than quantitative, so although it is recognised that images are used across methodological conventions, here we concentrate only on the former. Contributors have combined spoken interview data, ethnographic notes, diaries, autobiographical material, focus group discussions and naturalistic conversation alongside their use of visual material.

While the combined authors offer a diversity of perspectives, there is a shared focus on combining verbal and visual data as a means of capturing multiply layered experience. Moreover, all the contributors engage in critical reflection when discussing their work, in order to illustrate the complexities of working with visual materials to address psychological questions.

In this second edition, *Visual Methods in Psychology* includes exciting new contributions in the field of social, immersive and digital media exploring new topics in the field of memory, creative and participatory innovations in research, mental health and social identity.

The first part, 'Static media: the use of photography in qualitative research', includes chapters by authors who have used static images, such as photography in order to discuss (a) how such images may be interpreted and used within qualitative research or (b) how the different uses of photography can enhance research projects concerned with embodiment and the environmental/spatial setting. The various uses of photographs can lead to different sets of questions and possible interpretations, which the authors discuss in detail.

The second part, 'Dynamic features: social media, film and video in qualitative research', presents empirical research using video-based data and data from existing social networking sites. The focus of this part is the examination of *moving visual* images and how they mediate both self-presentation and interaction in real time, for the participant and for the intended (and unintended) audience.

The third part of the volume, 'Shared visions: opening up researcher participant dialogues in the community and beyond' has a distinctly community and action-oriented flavour. The authors of this section have used a variety of visual methods, including art exhibitions, film-making, photography, tapestry and drawing, to address how to increase dialogue between not only the researcher and participant but also the 'audience' of the research. Using varied types of visual images to achieve their goal, they nonetheless share a commitment to participant-led involvement in the research process within a broad range of action-oriented projects, which they hope to see used in the service of reducing stigma, changing social attitudes and increasing social justice.

In the final part, 'Ethical, analytical and methodological reflections on visual research', the authors focus on issues of ethics, methodology and reflexivity for researchers using visual approaches. Here they consider some of the difficulties encountered in using and interpreting images, be it existing images or images produced by their research participants, or they provide reflexive commentary on the process of carrying out the research. A further question is the place of the participants' 'voice' in the research process and how visual researchers can work towards a model of participant involvement that is even more inclusive or more mindful of the social hierarchies within the research process.

## The chapters

Before the first part of the volume begins, I introduce in Chapter 1 a number of key concepts in visual approaches, relevant to psychology more specifically. The aim of the chapter is to set a scene – a scene of the historical emergence of visual methods in psychology, as well as their exclusion. This chapter contains an overview of how psychology’s engagement with the visual has changed over time: from the beginning of psychological methodologies, through to more contemporary issues relating to the qualitative study of experience. Among other issues relating to the possibilities for furthering participant agency in the research process, I concentrate on the role of the visual in opening up a channel for examining affect and emotions, the material settings of experience (space) as well as examining accounts of experience through time (narrative).

### ***Part I: Static media: the use of photography in qualitative research***

In Part I, ‘Static media: the use of photography in qualitative research’, the contributors discuss a variety of qualitative research projects involving the use of photography to explore issues relating to memory, illness, embodiment, appearance and intimacy, using theoretical approaches drawn from social and health psychology, feminism, phenomenology and post-structuralist theory.

Alan Radley begins this part in Chapter 2 by examining the importance of looking ‘behind’ as well as looking ‘at’ images in photographs in his discussion of two separate visual research projects (one using photo-elicitation, the other using photo-production). He describes how important it is to make a distinction between the content of an image (*image*) and a person’s emotional and overall response in relation to that image (*depiction*). For example, he illustrates how photographs made by the participant provide an opportunity to go far beyond the actual content of the photograph (which may or may not be immediately meaningful) and into a realm where moments in life can be once again envisioned (through taking a photograph of an experience), encouraging the participant to articulate an image of an emotion (even though it may be different) after the event has passed. More than simply ‘reading’ the image, the participant is able, through the photograph, to conjure or imagine the experience of a particular moment and realise once more the context within which particular experiences took hold. This is more than looking ‘at’ the image; it is looking ‘behind’ the image also.

In Chapter 3, Ros Gill takes on the challenge of reading visual culture as it relates to issues of body image for both men and women. Much of the writing exploring this feature of visual culture over the past decades has pointed to the enduring differences in the ways in which men’s and women’s bodies are put on display. Attention has been drawn to differences of pose, stature and gaze, with many authors asserting that, despite what might look like parity in the objectification of the body, men are still largely depicted in ways that allow them to hold on to power and are not rendered entirely passive to an undifferentiated gaze. A large body of work has explored how these representations both work with and disavow homoeroticism,

without challenging patriarchal power. All this looks set to change after a radical shift in the regime of representing the male body in advertising in 2007/8, with a variety of male ‘crotch shots’ appearing, posed by men in traditionally ‘feminine’ pose. In this chapter, Gill examines a range of images taken from recent high-profile advertising campaigns to address the issue of whether both men and women have become ‘equally objectified’ by this shift in visual representations. Within this visual analysis, Gill’s chapter also raises a number of difficult questions about what it means for psychologists or other social scientists to ‘read’ such visual representations; she asks whether we can ‘read off’ other changes such as shifts in men’s and women’s subjectivities from the more general shifts in visual culture. Gill finishes by addressing the question of how we might begin to theorise the relationship between representations and identity, between (visual) culture and subjectivity.

In Chapter 4, Lilliana Del Busso explores two empirical studies that use photographs in different ways to explore young women’s embodied experiences in everyday life. This takes the question beyond young women talking about their bodies to address how young women *feel and move* in their bodies. In the first study, photographs from different time periods in women’s lives were used alongside life-history interviewing in order to bring the body *into* the interview conversation. Furthermore, the photographs were used as visual aids as well as tools to encourage women to remember key experiences and bodily sensations. In a second study a photo-production and diary method were used by the young women to explore how objects, spaces, places and other people helped shape their experience of being embodied in everyday life, and specifically in relation to their embodied experiences of pleasure. Del Busso argues that the approach she used has the capacity to produce more detailed and meaningful research data as well as furthering theoretical development through exploring ‘the body’ beyond discourse. In particular, the use of photographs can encourage the production of phenomenological detail in relation to women’s embodied experiences in their material and spatial contexts, avoiding the reproduction of the female body (object) solely as surface for the inscription of power dynamics.

In Chapter 5, Hannah Frith explores issues of appearance, embodiment and identity for women undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer, by using a photo-production technique from the beginning to the end of treatment. Here, Frith argues that taking photographs of illness experiences engages participants in the task of producing significant memories (rather than using the photographs as mere reflections of a past event). Thus the act of remembering here is seen as part of a social and communicative practice (of which the visual is an integral part), as opposed to a realist notion of there being static fixed memories revealed directly by the photograph. In reviewing these photographs during the interview, women are more directly involved in remembering past events and are confronted by images of past selves which serve to anchor their present narratives in complex ways. And yet, women’s refusal to capture a particular experience via photography is deemed equally significant. In the context of women taking and not taking certain photographs, Hannah explores the role of missing photographs, or photographs never taken, in creating boundaries around what selves and lives are available to be

remembered, and how choosing not to create some visual images is part of the process of active forgetting and distancing oneself from illness experiences.

In Chapter 6, Anamika Majumdar considers how the processes of photo-elicitation and photo-production are used to capture, albeit in different ways, the material settings through which experiences of intimacy and closeness in South Asian marriages are brought into being within the research context. In the first study, participants' existing family photographs were used in life-history interviews and only participants' discourse about their close relationships over time and space was analysed. In the second study, participants were asked to take photographs of objects, places and spaces significant to their married lives. The photographs were then used as the basis for in-depth narrative interviews. However, the content of the photographs was analysed jointly between researcher and participant, the participant being given the opportunity to organise and select particular photographs for discussion. Majumdar argues that the photo-production technique provided a more successful engagement with the material settings of intimacy and closeness as it encouraged participants to break free from normative narration, which was still evident in the first study. The photo-production technique also encouraged greater participant agency in actively showing how intimacy was practically accomplished and visibly mediated through objects and spaces. The 'showing', therefore, actively shaped participants' engagement with the 'telling' in a way that disrupted narrative rehearsal.

In the last chapter in this part, Steve Brown, Ava Kanyeredzi, Laura McGrath, Paula Reavey and Ian Tucker reflect on the conduct and outcomes of a photo-production study. The research was based on a medium-secure forensic psychiatric unit and involved service users photographing ward space and subsequently being interviewed, using the photographs as a guide. The study was successful in eliciting rich accounts of lived experience of the ward, but numerous practical issues surfaced in how such data could be collected and organised in a secure forensic setting. In particular, the issue of the authorship of the images is complex within this work. Analytically, the photographs served at once as primary data, an analytic device for interpreting interview data, and as a meta-analytic framework around which to organise themes. Drawing on Foucault's discussion of Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, the authors go on to draw out broader conceptual problematics about the relationship between visual materials and the discourses within which they become entwined. Brown et al. argue that visual research using static images ultimately oscillates between moments of implication and explication in relation to its subject matter.

## ***Part II: Dynamic features: social media, film and video in qualitative research***

In Chapter 8, Lewis Goodings explores the growing use of apps in managing experiences of distress. In particular, he examines the experience of using a health and wellbeing app, with the specific aim of highlighting the role of the visual and textual forms of communication that work together to produce a particular

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version of selfhood; and the mutual shaping of words and images in our everyday engagement with the world. In a departure from traditional methods in psychology and in conjunction with other works in this volume, he treats the visual as an equal in the communication of meaning and subjectivity, by providing examples of the way individuals use person digital media to enact meaning with others.

In Chapter 9, Johanna Motzkau explores the role of the visual in legal practice and psychological research through a reflexive exploration of forensic video data. Drawing on experiences and findings from a research project that compared child witness practices in England, Wales and Germany, the chapter illustrates how the visual asserts itself *throughout* the research process, emerging as an important and often equivocal arbiter within practices negotiating children's memory and credibility in the context of child sexual abuse investigations. The chapter focuses on the role of video technology introduced to provide better access to justice for children and vulnerable witnesses. Drawing on courtroom observations and data from interviews with legal professionals, she illustrates how in practice the video asserts itself as a participant, an autonomous proxy witness with a gaze and an ambiguous voice of its own. Examining closely how video operates in legal practice can make clear the need for researchers and practitioners to reflect critically on the direction and efficacy of the video's gaze.

In Chapter 10, Michael Forrester outlines a participant-observer approach to the 'naturalistic' study of language development in a pre-school child. To illustrate this, he draws on hours of video data taken of his own daughter between 12 and 41 months. The methodological approach he describes is informed by the principles of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, in order to study in fine detail the sequence of the child's language as it emerges in everyday interaction. In studying the child's emerging language skills over time, Forrester was also able to observe the mediating role of the video in changing the child and parent interactions. Using data to illustrate, he reveals how the camera re-organises the child's engagement with certain tasks, conversations and experiences. Forrester is able to demonstrate how the child, even at a very young age, is able to acknowledge that the camera is 'watching' them, and that through this gaze they are able to perform social acts that serve to alter the course of their interactions. The child discovers, for example, that the camera is an object to interact with (point at, gesture toward), or a kind of mirror through which to perform or rehearse different behaviours and modes of expression, and within this a variety of self-positionings and emotions.

In Chapter 11, Maria Pini and Valerie Walkerdine continue with a reflexive stance towards video data through their exploration of video-based, empirical research material. Drawing upon a project with a range of young female video-diaryists, discussion initially centres on issues of 'authenticity' that are commonly associated with the video-diary. Questions of access, empowerment and surveillance (all of which were central to the project's formation) are addressed in detailing the study's development and its place within the social scientific research field. In exploring the different diaries produced by (working- and middle-class, black and white) young women, the analysis moves beyond the diary's seductive claims to 'authenticity' and recasts it as a form of informal 'auto-ethnography'. This chapter is,

then, both theoretical and empirical, tackling pressing questions about the use of the visual within social-psychological research and demonstrating the different ways in which young women draw upon the resources to hand (including material, linguistic, imaginary and social resources) to fabricate varied and multiple visual fictions of self and subjectivity. In addition to the video affording greater room for these young women to explore different aspects of their subjectivity and presentations of self, the video was a constant reminder to them that they were being watched, and were thus subject to scrutiny by an audience – subject, in other words, to a normative psychological gaze that restricts as much as it enables communication.

In Chapter 12, Helen Lomax examines how video-based methodology can be used to enhance the study of identity formation. Her discussion centres on a piece of empirical work focusing on the interactional exchanges of mothers and midwives in relation to the mothers' birth experiences. Drawing on the theoretical and analytical framework of conversation analysis, Lomax examines how certain social orders (the prioritising of clinical discourse over the birth story and midwife–mother distancing) and identities are accomplished through locally and sequentially co-ordinated gaze, body movement and speech. The visual disengagement performed by midwives (not looking at the mother and attending to paperwork), for example, significantly disrupts the usual order of conversational turn taking and requires the mother to respond in a compliant and passive way, as she readjusts her posture and gaze and realigns them with the midwife's more disengaged body movements. Lomax argues that this visual realignment provides the situational conditions for a more 'clinical' discourse on the mother's experience of childbirth to emerge. In addition to a discussion of the empirical work, the author reflects on her position as a researcher recording visual data, as well as her participants' engagement with this visualising process. Rather than 'spoiling' the data, she argues that the mothers' recognition and interaction with the recording equipment provide valuable insight into their engagement with the research process. In addition, this recognition and interaction help to expand the researcher's knowledge of why participants might recruit them into the interaction and the effects of this recruitment on the flow and content of the conversational exchange.

In Chapter 13 Kayla Marshall, Kerry Chamberlain and Darrin Hodgetts explore issues in conducting research using Instagram, through a case study of their research on female and male bodybuilders. They employ visual narrative inquiry to explore how female and male bodybuilders construct gendered identities on Instagram through their self-representations and interactions with others. With this approach, they are able to conceptualise the various ways in which the Instagram practices of female and male bodybuilders reflect, reinforce and challenge broader processes of gender inequality. They further explore methodological issues around data collection, analysis and interpretation, as well as ethical issues around privacy, consent and use of data. Research on Instagram can be challenging, particularly in raising complex issues for visual analysis and interpretation, and yet the authors demonstrate how this research can be extremely productive for understanding contemporary ways in which people interact and construct their identities, and how these practices are implicated in important sociocultural processes.

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In Chapter 14 Rose Capdevila and Lisa Lazard draw on an explicitly critical feminist intersectional approach to explore the very recent *selfie culture* and photo-sharing practices, through the curation of women and girls' online identities. This recent practice has become a global phenomenon and important mode of self and social identity making, with 'the visual' usurping the narrative. And yet these practices are far from simple, creating new forms of subjectivity that require sensitive political and psychological readings. Using empirical examples from their research on women's engagement with photo-sharing practices online, they trace a path through multiple media and the theoretical and methodological engagements that inform readings of these complex practices.

### ***Part III: Shared visions: opening up researcher-participant dialogues in the community and beyond***

In Part III, the contributors discuss a variety of qualitative research projects involving the use of visual methods, such as photography, collage, film and drawing. These visual approaches enable the exploration of issues relating to mental health, race, identity and emotion, using theoretical approaches drawn from social and community psychology, feminist psychology, psychoanalysis and post-structuralist theory. To varying degrees, the chapters describe visual research that encourages greater participant involvement in, and ownership of the research process.

In Chapter 15, Katherine Johnson discusses visual methods in relation to experiences of mental distress for lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgendered (LGBT) people. The research presented in this chapter is driven by a commitment to the principles of community psychology (empowerment, participation) and knowledge exchange and emerges out of an existing research partnership with Mind, the UK voluntary-based organisation dedicated to improving social attitudes and services for individuals who are mentally distressed. The project uses participatory-action research methods for creating a space where participants can exercise greater control and ownership over the research process, including the research aims, objectives and analysis. In addition to the use of a photovoice project, where participants were asked to take photos relating to their feelings and experiences of both sexuality and mental distress, the researchers developed a visual exhibition of these experiences, creating a space for audience dialogue with the participants and their photographs. In describing the main analytical themes to arise from the project data, Johnson also discusses the audience response to the exhibition and asks how we might make sense of them in relation to challenging stigma and changing attitudes towards LGBT mental health.

In Chapter 16, Lynn Froggett describes the visual matrix method, briefly highlighting its applications and some of the theoretical resources informing its development. The visual matrix method is a qualitative, group-based method that was originally designed for researching experience of artistic production or reception and the psychosocial impact of aesthetic objects, processes or events on audiences, groups or communities. The primary objective discussed in this chapter is the actual production of the visual matrix and the nature of symbolisation within



it, brought to life by an extended example of its use in an arts and community setting. The interpretive protocol that follows a visual matrix session is explained, before concluding with an observation on the relationship between imagery and the language in which it is expressed. The case example has been chosen to highlight the fact that in this method the group is the primary unit of analysis, and the focus of interest is on shared rather than individual experience. The reader is also advised to view a short demonstration matrix in relation to a photography exhibition on YouTube. This conveys the nature of the 'snowflake' seating arrangement and the thinking that takes place within it.

In Chapter 17, Darren Langdridge, Jacqui Gabb and Jamie Lawson extend the discussion of the visual matrix method, but this time using a phenomenological approach to make sense of group activity. A common criticism of phenomenological methods has been its singular focus on individual experience at the cost of broader group level dynamics. Langdridge and colleagues provide an example of a group level existential-phenomenological method, inspired by the visual matrix method in research on intimate relationships. In collaboration with a filmmaker they discuss the production of a film series designed to engage the public with research findings on 'enduring love'. Using this modified version of the visual matrix method, they discuss the value of extending the phenomenological tradition to examine group dynamics, as well as the potential tensions that arise from this.

In Chapter 18, Angela Cassidy and John Maule discuss the possibilities of using a visual approach to explore food risk knowledge amongst a variety of stake holders, including scientists, risk policy managers, farmers, food industry workers and the public. One of the aims was to assess the similarities and differences in the way each of these groups represented food risk. A further aim was to devise a strategy for minimising any differences between the groups through the adoption of more effective and ubiquitous forms of risk communication. Their initial qualitative data, using interviews and focus groups, were unsuccessful in eliciting the kind of responses they needed, especially with the public whose knowledge of food risk was limited. In response, Cassidy and Maule developed a visual approach employing 'fuzzy-felt' to elicit mental models and social representations of food risk and to increase participant engagement with the issue, both at a community and industry level. In this, participants were asked to visually represent the food chain and any attendant risk by assembling the ready-made images made using the fuzzy-felt provided. They were then asked to write down more information on the possible risk posed by various foods and what they would do to minimise or mitigate such risks. In addition to the visual techniques, Cassidy and Maule carried out a series of individual interviews to elicit more in-depth information relating to risk management and responsibility, amongst other issues.

In Chapter 19, Janice Haaken focuses on video ethnography, psychoanalytic social theory and social action research, making use of a community documentary film project produced by the author, *Moving to the Beat*. Not only does she outline the theoretical underpinnings of the project but also identifies key areas for critical reflection. *Moving to the Beat* focuses on how African and African American youth are actively making use of hip-hop to communicate with one another and as a force for

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social change. The themes and storyline of the documentary were derived from key motifs identified by youth portrayed in the film, many of whom also participated as production assistants. Themes include differing understandings of hip-hop as a language for social change, conceptions of both male and female artists and activists, differing fantasies black youth hold of America and Africa and differing identifications with authority and rebellion. *Moving to the Beat* is a collaborative project (with crew in Freetown, Sierra Leone and Portland, Oregon) that grew out of an earlier field project on women and the Sierra Leonean civil war. The chapter addresses key questions that emerged out of the two years of producing *Moving to the Beat*; in particular it focuses on the process of representing aspects of the black diaspora and/or black culture that are devalued or degraded in mainstream popular culture, and by which criteria the activist documentary filmmakers evaluate the 'progressiveness' of visual media.

In Chapter 20, Zoë Boden and Michael Larkin describe how to undertake a relational mapping interview (RMI: Boden, Larkin and Iyer, 2018) and how to analyse the visual data created using this approach, which involves inviting participants to draw maps of their lives, including symbolic as well as literal details. They illustrate their method with data from an experiential research project, exploring the relationships of young people (18–25 years) under the care of Early Intervention Services for Psychosis. In particular, they were interested to understand what the experience of psychosis feels like, what it means to be connected with others at times of distress and during recovery. When both verbal and visual data are analysed, the authors argue that researchers are better supported in producing accounts that go beyond rehearsed accounts of relationality and are able to access the multiple sensory modes of relational experience that are both emotionally complex and charged.

Continuing with the theme of mental health and distress, Chapter 21, by Laura McGrath and Shauna Mullarkey, examines how the visual method of map making can enable the capture of affective experiences as they are lived out in specific locations; the where, how, when, who and what of affective meaning making. Examples are taken from two studies: one exploring experiences of space in mental health service use and another in an intentional community for people with learning disabilities. Mapping is argued to be useful both as a process and product within the construction of sense making for these groups, in particular and more broadly for qualitative research on lived experience. The specific strength of this approach is its aptitude for locating specific affective experiences, exploring layers of ambiguous or contradictory experiences and making materiality present in participants' accounts.

Caroline Howarth and Shose Kessi, in Chapter 22, examine representations of identity, power, self-reflection and stereotypes via a participant observation of, and collaboration with, a community-led arts-based project with young people of mixed heritage. Here the authors argue how images serve as a powerful means through which racism is reinforced through the *seeing of* minority individuals as different. This form of visibility, they argue, can lead to feelings of entrapment and potentially the desire to change physical attributes to reduce such visibility (hair straightening, nose reduction etc.). This London-based arts project (MOSAIC) was

designed to facilitate shared discussion and to provide a space for young people to challenge representations of 'race' and develop positive images of difference. Visual data (including photography and fabric weaving) drawn from extensive participant observation of the project reveal two things: first, how creative photography can capture the gaze of the other and the symbolic violence of racism as well as the possibilities for recasting the self in the eyes of others: second, how weaving together different threads and fabrics that resonate with cultural associations and social memories can produce shared images and narratives of connection and disconnection, belonging and exclusion. These visual data were analysed alongside textual data (consisting of free-flowing discussions that occurred within the workshops and more structured interviews) within a social representations framework. In this, Howarth and Kessi assess the extent to which images drawing on, or contesting dominant representations of 'race', are current in British society.

Helen Bowes-Catton, Meg-John Barker and Christina Richards, like Howarth, examine the complexities of identity through their work within existing community-based groups. In their project, they explore bisexual identity at the annual UK BiCon event, which frequently involves participants in creative and arts-based workshops. Here, the authors describe a visual project which aims to move beyond 'talk about bisexual identity' to an approach that encourages a more experiential and embodied account of bisexual identity. The empirical work they describe in Chapter 23 is based on a number of studies, including two photo-production studies of embodied experiences at (a) the actual BiCon event and (b) a photo-diary of a week in their everyday life. Three further group workshops at the BiCon event were held, which invited BiCon members to participate in model-making activities, involving Lego, plasticine and other craft materials. Through preliminary reflections on these data, the authors discuss how creative visual techniques create a significant space for participants to describe and more thoroughly explore embodied feelings, which move beyond traditional and dominant categories of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, they argue that many of the participants are better able to integrate the importance and impact of setting (space) into their accounts of embodied subjectivity.

In Chapter 24, Alex Iantaffi moves into the realms of education and therapy to explore how a drawing technique, 'the river of experience', can be used to enable participants to explore life narratives collaboratively with the researcher. Iantaffi develops their argument by drawing on examples in research with disabled women in higher education and in therapeutic settings, to illustrate the use of this tool. The individual drawings of the participants' rivers can, in fact, support the researcher in exploring the participants' worlds during the qualitative interview by highlighting moments that may have otherwise been lost in a purely verbal dialogue driven by the researcher.

In Chapter 25, Alexander John Bridger introduces an analysis of maps and cities to explore the role of place in relation to emotions and reflective thoughts, drawing on ideas from psychogeography, critical psychology and urban studies. Within this, he provides a reflection on the use of walking, narrative and creative maps, in exploring the interrelationship between subjective experience and material environments. Bridger uses empirical work from a project based at Ground Zero,

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New York and draws on two central situationist concepts – the *détournement* (a deliberate changing of words, images and sounds) and the *dérive* (a playful but mindful drift through one's material environment) to theorise the impact of space on subjective experience. Ground Zero has come to crystallise mass-media representations of September 11th (for 'Western' societies at least) and Bridger adopts a range of creative visual techniques, including photography, auto-ethnography and the creation of an alternative and disorienting map of Ground Zero (using the principles of the *détournement* and the *dérive*) to explore themes such as injury, power and memory.

In Chapter 26, Sarah Riley, Richard Brown, Christine Griffin and Yvette Morey follow on from Johnson in describing how they used a community-based art exhibition as a more creative and immediate form of research dissemination to increase audience engagement. The project behind the exhibition was designed to address how neo-tribalism (how people move between small and temporary groups and how these groups reflect shared values) is reflected in people's engagement, in relation to politics and identity, with electronic dance music culture (EDMC). The exhibition 'Reverberating Rhythms' was based on a series of interviews, focus groups and participant observations (where audio recording as well as photographs were taken) with individuals who participate in the EDMC scene. A reading group based on a theoretical work about tribalism, formed by the psychology academics of the project, was also used as a source of data for the exhibition, alongside participant data. The chapter builds on collaborative work between academics and artists in developing and disseminating psychological research. The collaborative process described here involved learning how to summarise and simplify without losing depth; how to communicate and interact with the artist in order to produce a joint vision; the construction of the materials themselves; and other practical activities (e.g. identifying a suitable venue, publicity, press, feedback questionnaires). Examples of the exhibits shown are provided throughout the chapter, describing the processes involved in their production, which often orient around a shift from the verbal (academic) to the visual (artistic). Ultimately the different media forms of graphic design, photography and fine art were argued to create a more vibrant and accessible form of engagement with a range of complex psychological ideas. Furthermore, the images allowed for a more subversive, contradictory and disruptive form of audience engagement with these ideas.

In the final chapter of this section, Paul Hanna and Mig Burgess present a reflexive account of their work on mental health stigma in a community arts setting. They describe the project Blackout, designed to provide insight into the lived experience of 'bipolar type II disorder'. The project was an attempt to draw on a range of experts and equipment to narrate the experience of an individual with a bipolar type II diagnosis, in order to empower and give voice to the individual.

Departing from narrative alone, the installation provided an innovative, multi-sensory, immersive experience to communicate with the general public. Furthermore, the immersive experience was accompanied by a discussion between the audience, the production team, mental health practitioners and the narrator (Burgess), in order to challenge and open up alternative narratives regarding the lived experience of this mental health diagnosis. The interplay between the visual and the auditory and the

potential for narrative change is clear from the authors' reflections, as they offer compelling insights on how we can co-produce research and interventions, to educate and alter perceptions of mental health.

#### ***Part IV: Ethical, analytical and methodological reflections on visual research***

In this final part, the authors reflect upon the use of visual research in psychology, by discussing certain elements of the modes of data collection, analysis and the conceptual underpinnings of visual approaches. They draw on theoretical and conceptual issues in community psychology, memory studies, social identity theory, feminist theory and social constructionism to ground their discussions.

In Chapter 28, Tim Fawns begins with a critical discussion of the claim that visual methods enhance participant agency within the research process.

He argues that photo-elicitation and production methods provide opportunities for greater participant agency, by allowing some selective control over what is discussed. More importantly, they are multi-modal – social and material encounters that can foreground past spaces and times. Fawns then presents his own reflections on his experiences of using photo-elicitation interviews in the study of autobiographical memory and photographic practice, highlighting the various potentials and challenges for psychological research. In particular, he examines how the social context of the interview and the researcher's role within it can afford opportunities for greater participant agency; through careful consideration of the researcher's understanding of photography and retrospective accounts and via theoretical precision in accounting for what constitutes the object of analysis. He further cautions against analysing the visual and verbal in isolation, since it can lead to reduced understandings of social and material contexts.

In Chapter 29, Arley Andriolo reflects upon the status of visual methods within Brazilian social psychology, providing a review of the bibliographic production over 20 years in Brazilian journals, dedicated to image-based research in social psychology. This chapter is an important addition to the volume in its provision of a South American context and the similarities and differences that exist in theoretical traditions across the globe. Specific Brazilian contributions to the field are examined in detail, including: (a) the use of several modalities simultaneously: poetry, painting, photography and video; (b) collaborative participation between researchers and members of the studied communities, using tours, workshops and encounters; and (c) the importance of the community's natural and cultural environment.

In Chapter 30, Darrin Hodgetts, Kerry Chamberlain and Shiloh Groot provide a reflexive account of the use of photovoice and photo-production techniques in community-based participatory research (in particular, their research with homeless people). Photovoice techniques have commonly been used to reveal deprivation and lobbying for change, with the participant positioned as 'expert' in the research process. The authors argue that, while this approach to research is useful, in making visible the perspectives and voices of marginalised groups, it may also invoke relatively naïve assumptions about the concept of voice. Images, like other modes

of discourse, are subject to social conventions around what is acceptable to show and are continually subject to comparison with already existing (media) images. The photography participants are also subject to constant re-negotiation and reconstruction within the resultant dialogue emerging from the research process. Hodgetts, Chamberlain and Groot thus argue that the reading of images must take place through a longitudinal engagement with participants' changing circumstances, with their emerging dialogue and the different relationships they have with their own space/setting.

In Chapter 31, Kate Gleeson discusses how to make explicit the analytical procedures we might use to examine visual data. She argues how visual methodology within psychology (and other social sciences) rarely makes explicit its mode of analysis, and certainly not at a level to encourage replication. The analyses that do exist (in semiological studies, for example) tend to focus on the close reading of individual examples of images, where the selection of material for analysis is idiosyncratic or not commented upon. Such approaches, she argues, do not sit well with psychologists who are still steeped in the notions of systematic analytic procedures, with clear sampling strategies that allow comparison across data sets. Gleeson's chapter sets out a systematic account of her analysis of photographic portraits and accompanying text (contained in a calendar) of individuals with learning disabilities. She refers to this form of analysis as 'polytextual thematic analysis': polytextual because it assumes the visual, the verbal and the written must be read in conjunction with one another. Gleeson provides a detailed description of the analytical steps and an exposition of the texts used to interpret the images is provided, as a means to expose the analytic process involved.

In Chapter 32, Karen Henwood, Fiona Shirani and Mark Finn provide a reflexive account of their use of three different visual techniques in working with men on a qualitative, longitudinal project about fatherhood. One of the major methodological and analytical tasks for the 'men as fathers' project was to highlight the diverse ways in which men position themselves psycho-discursively (including in terms of their 'imaginary positions') in their private and public relationships and within the changing times and settings in which they live their lives. Although Henwood, Shirani and Finn clearly see a positive role for the visual in working with ideas of space and time, they also encountered a number of difficulties. In the chapter they compare three types of visual methods, including collage (made up of existing media images), visual sequence (showing images of fatherhood sequentially, from different time periods) and personal photographs, which they combine with rich interview material. They describe, as an example, how a collage of images used at an early phase of the research to stimulate accounts of fatherhood and masculinities at times set up a judgemental good father/bad father frame and compromised the elicitation of more experiential data. Subsequently, they took to using visual images (e.g. in the form of family photographs) that were chosen by the men themselves to offset the problem of culturally primed images and to return men to more concrete and personal accounts of experience and the fractured underlying identities that intersect them. Each visual technique has value, they argue, in producing research-relevant data but each must be closely scrutinised in terms of its ability to address specific research questions.

In the final chapter, Ilana Mountian and colleagues provide a reflexive account of the use of photographs as part of an experience sampling method (ESM), in the study of wellbeing in higher education. The ESM is used to study pre-programmed segments of time. In this study, diaries and snapshot photography were used to capture experiences of enjoyment at pre-programmed moments throughout the day. As the participants were also the researchers, they were then able, in the context of group discussions, to reflect upon the process of producing visual accounts of experience. The authors discuss a number of ethical dilemmas arising from the use of the visual, especially with regard to power and reflexivity. More specifically, they examine the power dynamics associated with the intended audience (work colleagues) of the visual data, the impact of the intended audience on the production of the photographs and how to balance self-reflection against confidentiality in the context of ongoing work relationships. The work described in this chapter once again emphasises the need to take into account the contexts surrounding the production of visual materials, and the power dynamics that inform them.

## Summary

What I hope the reader will gain from this second edition is a sense of the creative potential for visual approaches; in developing, expanding and enhancing qualitative methods in psychology. Our lived experience of the world is so undeniably rich, layered and complex, which demands a set of multi-layered or multi-modal theoretical and empirical tools, to better grasp this plentiful landscape. The approaches outlined in this second edition of *Visual Methods in Psychology* offer insightful ways in which to work with such complexities in the spirit of contribution (rather than solution) to the ongoing debate surrounding the processes through which *experience and subjectivity* can be seen and understood.

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## Introduction

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# 1

## THE RETURN TO EXPERIENCE

### Psychology and the visual

*Paula Reavey*

#### **The visual has always been there: an (in)visible history of continuity in psychology?**

Psychology has a long-standing concern with the visual and with technologies of visualisation. This stretches beyond the specialised subdiscipline of the psychology of perception; it is instead part of the conceptual roots of the discipline as a whole. The emerging visual technology of photography was a central part of how the nascent discipline of psychology established its scientific credibility in the late nineteenth century – through the visual recording of scientific observation. For example, in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872/1999), Charles Darwin made comparisons across photographs and illustrations of children and animals as the evidential base for his theory of universal emotional expressions. This approach greatly influenced the growth of comparative psychology in the late nineteenth century (Richards, 2002). Moreover, photographs and minute observations of his son William Erasmus Darwin, which Darwin and his wife collected as a ‘developmental diary’ from his birth, are arguably the template from which developmental psychology established itself (Fitzpatrick & Bringmann, 1997).

The use of visual records to differentiate species and meticulously categorise plants and animals into various types and subtypes became the hallmark of nineteenth-century natural science (Daston & Lunbeck, 2011). It marked the systematisation of observation, indicating accuracy, evidential recording and careful attention to detail. What is measurable, therefore, is assumed to be what is observable. In the case of psychology, the fledgling discipline sought to separate itself from philosophy, and the myriad metaphysical difficulties which appeared to prohibit a ‘science of mind’, by emulating the natural sciences such as functional physiology as far as possible (Richards, 2002). Recent successes at that time in

physiology had arisen from mapping functional connections between anatomy and behaviour. This same logic was applied to what Gustav Fechner (1860/1966) called ‘an exact theory of the functional relationships between body and soul and between the bodily, mental, somatic and physiological world’ (cited in Meischner-Metge & Meischner, 1997: 102).

Two technologies of visualisation made this functional psychology possible. The first of these was the development of time-measuring devices such as the kymograph and chronoscope. This made it possible to record the time taken for the perception of stimuli and the execution of a response. Careful manipulation of stimuli under controlled laboratory conditions along with precise recording of the timing of responses became the basis of psychological experimentation (see Danziger, 1990). The second, and no less important, was the use of ‘graphic notation’ and ‘chronophotography’ by Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge to study the behaviour of animals and subsequently humans (see Rabinbach, 1992). Chronophotography is a process of taking rapid exposures (around a dozen per second) on either a single photographic plate or on a series of cameras. The aesthetically striking images which result – such as Muybridge’s famous photographs of galloping horses – provide a detailed visual description of the body’s movement in space over time. This impressive oeuvre clearly anticipated moving film and the culture of viewing more generally. Muybridge’s descriptions also proved invaluable for industrial psychology (e.g. the time-and-motion studies conducted by Frank and Lillian Gilbreth), which found them to be an inspirational ‘visual vocabulary’ for the project of restructuring and retraining the bodily movements of workers in order to maximise efficiency (Corbett, 2008).

Photography also greatly influenced the development of psychopathology and clinical psychology. Visual categorisation of different personality types and the categorisation of the ‘mad’, ‘subnormal’ or ‘criminal’ were performed by assembling photographic arrays in which purported mental differences could be made legible to the ‘trained eye’ (Jackson, 1995). Photographs were also commonly used to lend visual credibility to diagnostic categories of mental defects or ‘feble-mindedness’. Through careful visual recording, the spaces between a person’s eyes, the size of a forehead or the body posture of an asylum inmate could provide supposed direct evidence for an observable and thus categorical difference in the person under study from a ‘typical’ person.

The multiple-exposure technique used by Marey – where a series of images are exposed on the same photographic plate – was also used by Francis Galton (see Draaisma, 2000). Galton argued that his ‘compound photographs’ of criminals and of ‘consumptives’ taken one by one on to the same photographic plate showed their common features, since individual or non-common features would be effectively washed out during the process. The technique was, Galton claimed, a sort of ‘pictorial statistics’ where norms of human development and diversity could be visually represented. This idea fed into popular notions of normality and abnormality around mental health which gained currency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Porter, 2003). Visual techniques such as the Rorschach ink blot tests – surely one of the most recognisable representations of psychology – and

the Thematic Apperception Test (see Cramer, 1996) were and still are used to provide insight into a person's personality type, his/her unconscious motivational state, or used to detect signs of 'mental illness'.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, contemporary forms of visualising the differences between 'normal' and 'abnormal' individuals are now reported to be 'captured' in the magnetic resonance techniques commonly used in psychiatry, behavioural genetics and neuropsychology. However, the dangerous over-interpretation of these visual markers – that they represent enduring and static biological markers of diseases and brain dysfunction – should be approached with extreme caution (Bentall, 2009; Cromby et al., 2013).

Social psychology has throughout its history used film and photography as a means of documenting research and shoring up the 'face validity' of its pronouncements. The images of participants presented in Stanley Milgram's (2005) infamous studies on obedience in the early 1960s have long been treated as a valid demonstration of his claims, despite long-standing concerns around the rhetorical framing of these images by Milgram and his interpreters (Gibson, 2019). However, close analyses of the statistical evidence (and the ecological validity of the experimental set-up) about the tendency for 'ordinary' people to follow orders that can lead to the harming of others is somewhat overshadowed by these powerful images. Similarly the video recordings taken by Philip Zimbardo and colleagues of the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) have been promoted as powerful testimony to the ease with which people take on the aggressive or passive behaviour in their respective roles as prisoner or guard (although in this case video and audio records of the experiment recently made available have led to calls for a significant re-evaluation of Zimbardo's claims – see Reicher et al., 2018). This material was captured using the sort of 'hidden camera' techniques that have become the mainstay of reality-TV shows such as *Candid Camera* or *Big Brother*. Interestingly, Zimbardo himself has claimed that Alan Funt, creator of the first reality-TV show *Candid Camera*, was 'one of the most creative, intuitive social psychologists on the planet' (Zimbardo et al., 2000: 197).

Kurt Lewin also used hidden-camera techniques to make a series of films which focused on the spaces of child development, the best known being the 1931 film *The Child and the World*. This film work led to a meeting with the Russian auteur Sergei Eisenstein (director of Russian classics including *Battleship Potemkin* and *October*) and subsequent plans for a psychological laboratory to be established in Moscow in collaboration with the local state film academy (Lück, 1997: 285).

To summarise, a historical analysis of the role of the visual within psychology can reveal its instrumental effects in providing the context for 'the psychological' to become observable and, therefore, measurable and more 'scientific'. In using visual images as evidence, and in employing visual technologies to increase the accuracy and thus the status of psychological observations, the discipline of psychology has also made its findings more publicly accessible. And yet, despite these noteworthy uses of visual images throughout the history of psychology, there has been very little in the way of the development of methodologies attempting to accommodate the visual on its own terms. This is especially difficult to understand with regard to

qualitative methodologies that claim to capture more readily meaning making in everyday experience. To understand why this is so, it is necessary to review briefly the emergence of qualitative research in psychology to grasp why it is that everyday experience has been in the grip of language-based methodologies for the past four decades.

### **Qualitative research in psychology: experience, discourse and visual myopia**

During my time as an undergraduate and postgraduate student in the Northern English City of Sheffield, I was fortunate enough to be taught and supervised by a leading phenomenologist (the wonderful Peter Ashworth), discourse analysts (the super Brendan Gough and Kathy Doherty) and a leading feminist researcher in the field of health and gender (the marvellous Paula Nicolson). This methodological and theoretical plurality led to a delicious confusion and excitement for the potential of a multi-layered account of experience – an excitement that has yet to dissipate (Brown et al., 2011).

This exposure to multiplicity was formative in the development of my subsequent work on the felt quality of our experience, its narrative-discursive construction, its emplacement in the world and the political consequences of being located within particular geographical, social and cultural landscapes. For me, the issue was never about choosing qualitative over quantitative, it was how to best capture the layers of lived experience and address questions of theoretical and political relevance.

Though there remain many scholars seemingly determined to disparage qualitative research in psychology, it is now well established in its subdisciplines (critical, community, social, health, forensic, clinical, educational), even though it can still be positioned on the margins of the mainstream. At best, qualitative research slips into mainstream circles as an adjunct of ‘mixed methods’ approaches, rather than standing on its own as a mode through which the ‘psychological’ can be studied. This is due largely to its overarching focus on human meaning making, rather than the establishment of generalisable laws. Qualitative researchers continue to pursue the variety of ways in which people make and interpret meaning, make sense of and feel their way through the experiences they encounter and how they tell stories about their lives and communicate with others (Willig, 2001; Parker, 2004; Stainton Rogers & Willig, 2008; 2013). The aim of this approach is to explore the rich texture of experience and its interpretive possibilities, not only for research purposes, but in the service of social change (see Parker, 2004). The participant, and not the researcher, thus provides the focus for meaning generation and is heralded an active agent within the research process – the antithesis of an objectivist scientific approach.

In the United Kingdom, there exists a range of theoretical traditions adopted to make sense of what it means to study human meaning making and experience. Phenomenology, post-structuralism and postmodernism in particular have dominated, situating experience in first-person perspectives and/or

discourse. Furthermore, atheoretical approaches are now widely adopted within mixed methods studies, where qualitative research is used as a means to describe processes of change in treatment interventions and primarily used as a means to 'back up' quantitative data (sometimes known as a 'confirmatory' approach – Creswell, 2013). Whether theoretical or atheoretical, accounts of experience are unified in locating experience at the level of the spoken word.

The take up of post-structuralism, in particular, has been somewhat esoteric and has tended to promote the linguistic and the discursive above other modalities (e.g. visual, sound, affect). There are a number of reasons underpinning this. First of all, Anglo-North American critical social science has been greatly influenced by ordinary language philosophy (e.g. Wittgenstein, Austin, Ryle) and the development of linguistically oriented 'phenomenological sociology' in the form of ethnomethodology. It is notable, for example, that three of the major figures in Anglo critical psychology of the 1970s and 80s (i.e. Ken Gergen, Rom Harré and John Shotter) were deeply immersed in the work of Wittgenstein. Second, the reception of the semiotic tradition in the UK has tended to focus on a narrowly linguistic reading of De Saussure rather than the huge variety of other forms of semiotics which deal with other modalities of understanding and expression – such as C. S. Peirce's pragmatist semiotics, A. J. Greimas's comparative/structuralist semiotics, Thomas Sebeok's zoosemiotics/biosemitotics and Felix Guattari's schizoanalytic semiotics. Finally, key post-structuralist authors such as Derrida and Foucault have mistakenly been read as discourse theorists. Derrida's (1976) phrase 'there is nothing outside the text' (p. 158) has been itself read outside of the text as a claim that there is no intelligibility outside of discourse, when in fact it is a highly nuanced technical point about the hermeneutics (interpretation) of philosophical discourse and the metaphysics of graphism (writing in a very broad sense).

The treatment of Foucault is also of particular note, not least because a methodology known as 'Foucauldian discourse analysis' is now recognised in UK qualitative research (Willig, 2013). The method draws inspiration from *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, where Foucault makes the claim that 'discourse constructs the objects of which it speaks' (Foucault, 1972/2008: 54). As with Derrida, this very playful claim is made as part of a broader set of arguments, in this case with the history of ideas and Frege's philosophy of language. Moreover, the book, along with the lecture 'The Discourse on Language' from the same period, makes it abundantly clear that at this time Foucault was concerned explicitly with the relationship between the discursive and the 'extra-discursive'. This concern came to full fruition in Foucault's subsequent investigations of the relationship of knowledge and power, where the visual plays a central role in terms of the organisation of bodies (i.e. panopticism) and the representation of the population in terms which enable its management as a productive and reproductive force (i.e. biopolitics) (Foucault, 1977, 2008). To selectively read Foucault as a discourse theorist is then to miss the richness and subtlety of his thinking for psychology (for a 'non-discursive' reading of Foucault and psychology, see Brown & Stenner, 2009).

Similarly, within phenomenological traditions in psychology, such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), though the emphasis is on felt, first-person

accounts of experience, thick description and the idiographical nature of experience and its expressive content *in the world*, much of the research until recently has based itself on an analysis of verbal accounts only (see Boden et al., 2018).

Despite the theoretical or descriptive orientation of qualitative work, it seems that the majority still overly rely on *spoken* semi-structured and unstructured interview data, natural conversations, focus group discussions, diaries or written reports, which examine either broad sense-making patterns, or the minute detail of language structure and performance in social interactions. Recent developments in conversation analysis (CA), using video data to record verbal and non-verbal contexts in interactional exchanges are gaining ground (Green, 2010), however, and Helen Lomax's work in this volume highlights the strengths of a CA approach that considers the entire interactional exchange, including visual cues and body language. What many qualitative techniques share in common nonetheless is a reliance on the spoken or written word as the only source of data – a fundamentally mono-modal approach. This approach is problematic for various reasons, not least its obfuscation of the immediate material settings that foreground lived experience (McGrath & Reavey, 2018) and the feeling and affectual aspects of experience (Cromby, 2015; Stenner, 2018) and its multi-sensorial nature.

In the following section, examples from visual research in psychology will illuminate the contextual and situated nature of meaning making and lived experience and how experience might be more fully captured in all of its rich embodied and spatial texture.

### **Why qualitative psychology could use visual approaches: the potential for multi-modal approaches**

To date, visual approaches in psychology have tackled a range of experiential issues, including embodiment (Del Busso, 2009; 2011; Gillies et al., 2005; Brown & Reavey, 2015), violence and abuse (Kanyeredzi et al., 2013), health and illness (Radley & Taylor, 2003a, 2003b; Radley, 2009), remembering (Middleton & Edwards, 1990; Radley, 1991; Middleton & Brown, 2005; Brookfield et al., 2008; Brown & Reavey, 2015), identity and appearance (Gleeson & Frith, 2006; Capdevila & Lazard, Chapter 14, this volume) and mental health and distress (Silver & Reavey, 2010; McGrath, 2012; Reavey et al., 2019; Tucker et al., 2019). This multi-modal work has combined visual and verbal data to create a richer picture of the topic under study, using various visual techniques, from the use of already existing images (e.g. in the form of family photographs, here referred to as photo-elicitation) to the use of images generated within the context of the research, here referred to as photo-production<sup>2</sup> (participant-generated photos, photo-diaries, paintings and drawings), through short films and social media more broadly. What these authors share is the acknowledgement that (a) individuals experience the world not only through narrative, but other sensorial forms such as visual images that are situated in specific settings (space) and bodies (embodiment) and (b)

individuals are already using multi-modal forms of expression and communication when not only (re)presenting experiences, but feeling their experiences in everyday life. The renewed interest in affect and emotion in psychology (e.g. Cromby, 2015) has been influenced by social psychology's observation that social and cultural practices shape affect and feeling – the visual of course is a large part of this (Reavey & Johnson, 2017). As people become more proficient in their use of communication technologies to convey ideas and feelings and engage in forms of social interaction, relationality and subjectivity, it is ever more vital that researchers in psychology engage with them, to better understand lived experience in contemporary settings.

How we use and interpret the visual in research, of course, is in turn informed by the kinds of questions we wish to ask and the theoretical frameworks that inform those questions. Authors in this volume have adopted visual techniques in a variety of ways to address complex issues relating to the study of experience: from phenomenology, social constructionism, process theory and psychoanalysis. By outlining how visual methods are used to address particular experiential issues throughout the volume, we can begin to see their utility in taking the study of experience beyond textual representations and into the realm of multi-modality. We will also see how researchers have created a space to examine 'hard-to-reach' issues, such as the environmental settings that individuals experientially inhabit and the emotional and embodied elements of experience that are always present but rarely directly acknowledged (Brown et al., 2008; McGrath & Reavey, 2018).

In visual research using painting, maps, drawing, photography and film, my colleagues and I have explored topics ranging from mental health, space, embodiment, memory and ageing; here we have also found that the visual can successfully work to disrupt well-rehearsed present narratives on a topic (Gillies et al., 2005; Brookfield et al., 2008; Reavey, 2008; Silver & Reavey, 2010; McGrath, Mullarkey & Reavey, 2019). When confronting a photograph from their past, participants can suddenly be faced with and are able to imagine the emotions or their embodied states from that time, such that the past can enter into the present moment and create a new narrative, or a more complex, layered account (especially if the re-emergence of the past collides with narratives of the present). This is not to suggest that the visual *catches* the person out or *forces* them to tell the truth about the past, but that it might serve to initiate a more complex and layered account – one that is more seeped in emotional resonances and reminders and one in which the setting (the actual place) of the experience is brought into sharper view. In one research group meeting on embodiment,<sup>3</sup> my colleagues and I were looking at photographs of ourselves, for the purpose of studying embodiment; it was of interest that one of the group members was genuinely surprised by how the photograph disrupted their initial narrative memory of that period. Before viewing the image, they had spoken about this period as a 'messed up' time in their life and yet the photo reminded them of the complexity of this memory; in the photo they appeared well presented and celebratory. The visual jolted them into an

alternative narrative position, which cohered and collided with their initial narrative recollection. I would argue this collision is productive, in so many ways.

Part of the reason for greater opportunities for ‘emotionality’ (explored below) is an emphasis placed upon participation and agency within the research process. In many visual studies, participants are actively encouraged to make their own choices about the photographs they take and/or select to discuss in any subsequent interview (Radley & Taylor, 2003b; Mitchell et al., 2005). In studies using drawing or mapping, participants can actively produce images that contain both direct and metaphorical references, serving as a useful way to unlock contradictory or difficult emotions, using interpretative phenomenological analysis and/or process theory (see Boden et al., 2018; McGrath et al., 2019; see Boden and Larkin in Chapter 20 and McGrath and Mullarkey in Chapter 21, in this volume).

In other words, participants are more involved in what is seen, as well as how the images are organised and used in the research process. This in itself can provide a space for participants to focus on images that have emotional resonance. However, the emotional resonance of some images may also lead to active avoidance by the participant, especially in times of loss or grief, so it is vital that as analysts we do not assume that images will necessarily evoke emotions; and if they do, we cannot assume individuals will want to pursue them in a research context. In the next section, the emergence of interest in affect and emotion, as well as space in studies of experience, has contributed to a call for qualitative research to be more mindful of the multi-modal nature of our lived experiences and the need for a multi-modal methodological approach.

### **Situating and feeling experience: multi-modal perspectives**

It is self-evident that lived experience is multi-layered and multi-sensorial – phenomenologists have built this into their theorisation of experience as a set of meaning-making practices. And process theorists, following Whitehead among others, have highlighted how the person and the world are not separate and that feeling precedes thought (see Brown & Stenner, 2009; Stenner, 2018 for an excellent discussion of the adoption of process thinking within the social psychology of experience). Rather than entangle ourselves in philosophical wranglings over the nature of experience, I wish instead to discuss how considerations of these theoretical traditions might lead to a more nuanced and rich methodological orientation. Despite differences between phenomenological and process thought, there are some interesting similarities regarding the need to consider the world and experience as entirely connected – at least in Merleau-Ponty’s later writing (1970– for a detailed discussion of the relationship between Merleau-Ponty and Whitehead, see Hamrick & Der Veken, 2011).

Merleau-Ponty, one of the twentieth century’s greatest phenomenological thinkers, was keen to stress how perception, thought and feeling are emotionally driven, through interconnections with others, in space and time. ‘Thinking’ and ‘language’ perspectives must incorporate this fundamental emotionality in order to



embrace their interconnected and dynamic nature. Similarly, Whitehead insisted on studying experience as part of the natural order and the emergence of feeling prior to thought (Hamrick & Der Veken, 2011).

<sup>4</sup>This relates both to the use of the visual in ‘real-time space’, through the examination of how people use the visual in ‘live’ social interactions; or in the context of ‘finished and finite’ images that can be used as an anchor for present discussions (Iedema, 2003: 30). Many researchers now recognise that visual media can be productive of lived experience: of self, other people and the world (physical and virtual space) (Reavey & Johnson, 2017). Projects within psychology and allied disciplines have formed part of a wider objective of developing an understanding of experience that explicitly attends to the material/virtual spaces in which human experiences emerge and flow (Ingold, 1996; Brown & Reavey, 2015). Furthermore, the perceived failures of wholly linguistic epistemologies, to analytically attend to what many consider to be central tenets of our experience, namely how we feel our way in the world, have led to a renewed interest in analytical pluralism, including visual methods (Cromby, 2015).

### **The rise of affect and emotion in qualitative research: being ‘seized’**

This ‘turn to affect, emotion and feeling’ as a central analytical orientation toward experience of the world has necessitated a rethink of methodologies more generally. The term ‘affect’ has several meanings, commonly tied to specific disciplinary frameworks. Drawing on neuroscience, ecological psychology, feminist and queer theory, certain qualitative researchers are now oriented towards analysing more of the experiential landscape, including the study of affect and emotion in relation to embodiment (how one feels in one’s body), the physical space or setting (which may of course include virtual space – social media etc.) and the interdependency between ourselves and other bodies and environments. Affect is not clearly structured, but rather felt as an intensity and unstructured potential for action. ‘Affect’, in Spinozist terms, is the term for the ‘actions and passions’ our body experiences in relation to other bodies.<sup>5</sup> To put it in James J. Gibson’s terms,<sup>6</sup> we might say that affect is the ‘feeling’ of affordance – our sense of the ways in which we might engage with some other body, what it offers, what we can do with it and through it, and what it might do to us (Brown & Reavey, 2015: 12). If affect is the entirety of this assemblage, then feeling is the sensation that we ourselves encounter (the personal sensation), which we then check against previous sensations encountered over time. Emotion<sup>7</sup> on the other hand is considered to be the cognised and socio-cultural rationalisation of affect and feeling, wherein we organise and make sense of feeling, in the context of culturally constructed meanings, signs and expectations (Stenner, 2018). One argument for using visual images as a means to capture affect is the potential for the visual to seize or prick us. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes describes this as a ‘*punctum*’ – which can literally mean ‘to wound’, as the visual steers us away from too generic

or ready-made narratives of experience, thus providing access to a more specific and intense moment or feeling – a feeling that is grounded in experience. ‘It is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me’ (Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 27). Barthes discusses this potential for the image to seize us through his description of one specific photograph (The Winter Garden) of his mother, which formed part of a deep visual memory of her. Via the image, this emotional seizure provided access to memories which were not otherwise obvious, accessible or narratable. Barthes thus distinguishes between two terms for directing an analysis of an image, the *studium* and *punctum*. The *studium* is identified by Barthes as a kind of general and easily narratable aspect of an image. A photograph might directly portray something about the historical or social context of the image, such as where the photograph was taken, the *studium* means that one can read the photograph as a historical and political document, as well as a cultural testament to the gestures and habits of past societies (*Camera Lucida*, p.26).

### **Emotions evoked and engaged through the visual**

Researchers in psychology have observed how images might afford the possibility of accessing the un/speakable and evoke emotions that are otherwise put to one side, or reconfigured to fit with a well-rehearsed narrative (Reavey, 2011, Cromby, 2015).

Charity campaigns use powerful visual cues to invite emotional reactions, inciting people to financially dig deep. Without visual cues, it is difficult to see how many charities would survive, without potential donators visually bearing witness to and thus emotionally responding to the difficulties their benefactors endure (Radley, 2011). Audiences must enter into and momentarily share the experience of pain and suffering, otherwise benefactors might remain the distant ‘other’, their story cast to one side in a sea of text. In visual research, images are used to remind participants of feelings associated with a particular event, because they have perhaps chosen to move on from, or have actively forgotten a difficult or traumatic experience (Frith, 2011; Brown & Reavey, 2015). Given the majority of qualitative researchers deal with participant memories when they conduct research, it is worth noting how emotions can be examined for their complexity and multiplicity when more aspects of the experiential field (visual, sound, tactile) are incorporated.

In everyday life, of course, individuals can deploy the visual to wilfully engage with emotions, as opposed to avoiding or forgetting them. A video of a wedding or a child’s first steps may be played over to activate distant or emotionally intense memories which serve a particular purpose in the present – to reignite a bond, or sense of duty. It is unsurprising that photographic and video footage of this kind is part of the domestic assemblage in industrialised societies, where the impetus to remember how things feel can be intrinsic to the sustaining of collective memory and familial identity<sup>8</sup> (Kuhn, 1995/2002; Brown & Reavey, 2015).

Visual researchers in psychology have embraced the power of the visual to incite emotion and bring feeling to the conversational fore in an interview or focus group

(see Froggett in Chapter 16 and Langdrige et al. in Chapter 17 in this volume for contrasting psychoanalytic and phenomenological approaches to this, respectively). Part of this project has been to directly involve the setting in which affect and emotions emerge, following a Spinozist and/or process tradition of affect theory (see McGrath, 2012; Smith & Tucker, 2015; Brown & Reavey, 2015).

In recent work on affect and atmosphere in psychiatric settings, my colleagues and I have used photographs produced by staff and service users in hospital, and observation of sounds on the ward, to explore with participants how feelings and thoughts emerge and move through the spaces they and others occupy across time, and how such environments afford (make possible) particular thoughts and feelings at given moments (Brown et al., 2019; Kanyeredezi et al., 2019; Reavey et al., 2017; Tucker et al., 2019). We argue that this enables a situated reading of how distress is interactionally and spatially interdependent with the affordances of the hospital setting itself. This rich and multi-layered analysis of the service users' experience is only possible, we would argue, once we attend to the multiple experiential modalities that include the visual, verbal and sonic, as an interdependent nexus.

A powerful example of how the visual can bring to the fore difficult-to-reach emotions can be found in Radley and Taylor's (2003a) photo-production study of hospital patients' recovery on a general hospital ward. The study involved participants taking pictures of the hospital spaces where they were recovering, as well as an interview one month after they had left hospital. Radley and Taylor facilitated participants in using the photographs to navigate the interview discussion, and found that an image itself rouses the participant towards addressing inaccessible feelings, such as fear, frustration and anger. Other studies have used visual cues to move from overly generic narratives to more specific and detailed emotional narratives that are complex and multi-layered.

A photo-narrative study with Japanese-Canadians interned during the Second World War revealed how different kinds of memories and emotions to the ones initially spoken could be invoked using visual cues. Kunimoto (2004) notes how photographs were able to elicit accounts that were far more emotional, specific and rich; accounts which contrasted significantly with the 'dry' narratives offered in their absence. In this study, the visual brought to mind deeply concealed feelings of pain, betrayal and shame, even though the images both betrayed and captured participants' experience. According to Kunimoto, however, the image does not contain the emotion; rather the mutual intertwining of the visual and verbal narrative enables the exploration of the often contradictory and taut movement of emotions, as they flow through autobiographical and collective memory.

It is now well established that autobiographical memory is heavily shaped by our sense of self and emotion in the present (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Bernstein & Rubin, 2012). Images can be useful ways in which to examine the interrelationship between the past and the present, and the emotional fluctuations and changes, as well as the similarities that continue through time. A more direct exposure to a past (a photograph, for example) can facilitate a discussion on how certain feelings might be both connected and disconnected to how I am feeling

now (Brown & Reavey, 2014), allowing the researcher and participant to explore a richer and more diverse engagement with feeling and emotion through time.

The possibility for exploring emotions and feelings across different developmental time periods was explored by Silver and Reavey, in a study of selfhood with individuals diagnosed<sup>9</sup> with body dysmorphic disorder (BDD).<sup>10</sup> Silver and Reavey (2010) adopted a visual narrative approach, using both drawing and photo-elicitation to explore with participants aspects of their appearance across different developmental time periods. What Silver and Reavey found particularly interesting was the way in which participants moved away from accounting for their distress in the present and brought an intensely emotional account of their idealisation of their childhood self, on which present judgements about their perceived facial disfigurement were grounded (Silver & Reavey, 2010). The emotional connection between past and present had been absent up until this point in the clinical literature. Silver and Reavey argue that visual methods were particularly apposite to examine the emotional connection between past and present, as participants directly accessed a visible portrait of the self physically (and thus emotionally) changing over time.

### **Viewing experience from the perspective of time and space**

A further potential is the capacity for visual methods to explore the spatial dimensions of experience. Almost all qualitative methods involve asking participants to recall and reflect on experiences which then tend to organise such narratives in terms of time. Visual methods can disrupt such temporally oriented narratives, by encouraging participants to reflect on the social and material contexts of their experiences – not just *when* but also *where* experiences emerge (see also McGrath & Reavey, 2018; McGrath, Mullarkey & Reavey, 2019).

Biographical or narrative research in psychology has stressed the importance of gaining access to participants' experiences as they occur across time, in order to establish patterns of continuity as well as change (Wengraf et al., 2000). Unless we are studying real-time interaction (as many conversation analysts and discursive psychologists argue we should), qualitative research deals largely with recollections of events and versions of self, or discourses relating to personal narratives/stories, that are both past and present. Time and memory thus loom large in the experiences that individuals recall in the context of qualitative research (see Reavey, 2017). And yet, time and memory do not stand alone, and are interlaced with space – in other words, the settings/places where experiences occur. Whilst many narrative researchers have long argued for a greater sensitivity to the specifics of personal narratives over time (Wengraf et al., 2000), less attention is paid to narrative setting. A number of authors in this volume point to the importance of viewing experience and subjectivity as situated in specific locations (see Majumdar in Chapter 6, Pini and Walkerdine in Chapter 11, McGrath and Mullarkey in Chapter 21, Andriolo in Chapter 29 and Hodgetts et al. in Chapter 30, this volume). The process by which

we story ourselves into being is argued to be spatially framed, not just time-framed. We can accept this if we embrace the self as a process and form that shift according to context. As Foucault wrote (2000: 290–291):

It [the self] is not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself. You do not have the same sort of relationship to yourself when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes to vote or speaks at a meeting and when you are seeking to fulfil your desires in a sexual relationship. Undoubtedly there are relationships and interferences between these different forms of subject; but we are not dealing with the same type of subject. In each case, one plays, one establishes a different type of relationship to oneself. And it is precisely the historical constitution of these various forms of the subject in relation to games of truth which interests me.

Following Foucault (2000), the argument is that recollections of experience should not be read as a product of a coherent self, or a self made up of a stable substance (which we then believe makes our biographies coherent). By treating the self as a substance, the implication is that, whilst there is a change and development over time, which can lead to reframing and interpreting the past in line with our current state of self-hood (see Reavey, 2010), it nevertheless implies a narrowing of interpretive flexibility.

Thus, self should be treated as continually varied, depending on the setting in which it emerges. As Brown and Stenner (2009: 168) note,

If it is possible to speak of a subject at all then it must be done with reference to the ‘various forms’ subjectivity takes and the multiplicity of relationships and connections that pertain between these forms.

Furthermore, the spaces wherein the self unfolds directly leave their mark on any subsequent recollection of this self. By ‘leaving their mark’ what I mean is the space is an integral part of the sets of relations that contribute to the patterns of self-hood over time (Reavey, 2010).

Different kinds of spaces also make possible different versions of agency; our capacities for acting and self-making are affected by the meanings associated with certain spaces. In a photo-production diary study by Del Busso (2009) on young women’s experiences of embodiment, participants were asked to take pictures of objects or spaces that reflected experiences of embodied pleasure (eating, having sex, exercise etc.). In subsequent interviews it became clear that the manner in which participants experienced embodied pleasure was intimately tied to the setting in which those experiences occurred. Some women felt greater embodied agency in outside natural spaces where they were able to move freely, without being restricted by expectations surrounding their appearance and without fearing for their safety. In other public spaces, such as built-up spaces or heterosexualised spaces (clubs and

pubs), their agency was felt to be restricted and feelings of powerlessness increased. The visual display of spaces and settings thus afforded greater opportunity for young women to be able to explore the different possibilities for self-hood and agency. Space is therefore an integral component of the selves that we can be and attention to space affords greater awareness of experience as embodied in a variety of intersecting locations in which various aspects of self-making are practised and emergent (McDowell, 1996).

If we can take a visual record at the time at which we experience something or can gather together existing visual images of an event (e.g. our existing personal photographs), we can bring the space and setting of the experience to the foreground and make it explicit in the context of discussion (Brookfield et al., 2008).

Moreover, visual research in psychology can bring to the fore the spaces through which people experience themselves so that the various forms of self-hood reported (verbally) and shown (visually) are contextualised. The gap between the material and the discursive thus becomes significantly reduced and seen in connection with one another – ‘as one in a web’, as Brown and Pujol pronounce (Brown & Pujol, 1998; Brown, 2001).

### **Increasing participation**

Finally, an important argument for using visual research within qualitative research is the potential for increased participation in the generation and organisation of data, thus allowing the participant to shape the context from which personal stories are told. Greater freedom is afforded to participants if they are offered the opportunity to ‘show’ their experiences and lives, rather than ‘narrate’ them. One could say that in some sense this process invites the reader and researcher to begin from the position of bearing witness to the participant’s ‘world-making’ (to borrow a phrase from Radley, 2009), rather than acting from the position of the detached observer (see Radley, 2009 for an extended discussion of narrative, art and testimony). Many researchers using photographs, involve participants in the organisation of images for further interview or focus group discussions. Participants are afforded more agency in the ordering of the material and in speaking to issues in a sequence with greater personal relevance (Radley & Taylor, 2003b). As a result, participants find they have more time to reflect on their experiences when they are more in charge of the data-collecting and organising process. One could also argue that this process affords greater creativity within the research process.

For some visual researchers, involving participants in data organisation and collection is central to the aim of democratising the research process. Participant engagement and agency within the research process is a growing requirement of many funding bodies who rightly insist on stakeholder engagement at all stages of recruitment, data collection and analysis. This is a welcome move, but one that is far from straightforward and not always successful (see Henwood et al. in Chapter 32 and Mountian et al. in Chapter 33, this volume) and yet there are examples of

greater participant agency using visual approaches, at least in terms of defining the parameters of the research activity, and providing a space to challenge dominant cultural and social representations (see Bowes Catton et al. in Chapter 23, Johnson in Chapter 15, Hodgetts et al. in Chapter 30 and Howarth and Kessi in Chapter 22, this volume).

## Summary

Psychology has a long history of engaging with the visual. And yet the visual has not been a prominent feature of methodological procedure in psychology, including social constructionist or more broadly qualitative approaches. I have proposed a number of reasons for this, including the uptake of language-based philosophies in social constructionist traditions, and the over-emphasis of language/discourse in readings of Foucault's work, among others. Following this, I have pointed to the process through which visual approaches may open up possibilities for understanding experience – as multi-layered and multi-modal phenomena. This, I contend, is why we may be better able to engage individuals in the process of exploring the link between past and present in a way where the past can be more present – in terms of its setting (space), emotion and embodiment – through the use of ready-to-hand visual (re)presentations. Of course I have also cautioned against assuming 'a/the truth' lurks behind the image. The visual is as much subject to interpretation as any other modality, replete with plurality and ambiguities. With this cautionary note in mind, the visual can nonetheless bring to the fore emotions, embodied states and spaces that facilitate the grounding or contextualising of experience. Greater opportunity is afforded for participants to begin the research process by showing us their worlds, in contrast to *responding* to a researcher's agenda. In doing so, the multi-layered aspects of those experiences – that include both space and time – can be explored by the participant and researcher as more of a joint negotiation.

## Notes

- 1 This is not a term I agree with but it reflects the parlance of the time – see Cromby et al. (2013) for further discussion.
- 2 Sometimes authors refer to *photo-elicitation* to describe both approaches. However, for the sake of clarity, I have decided to separate the two terms to distinguish between these two very different approaches. The authors of this volume, in the main, also make this distinction for continuity and clarity.
- 3 This research group was made up of six researchers dedicated to the empirical study of embodiment. In the group, we experimented with a variety of methodologies to examine embodiment, which we took to mean how one feels, senses and expresses bodily sensation and action.
- 4 This section is based heavily on the section written with Katherine Johnson for our chapter on visual methods in Willig, C. & Rogers, S. (2017) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage.

- 5 Note that the terms affect, feelings and emotion, and the stated differences between them can be highly varied, depending on theoretical orientation. Here I provide a circumscribed reading of the terms, taken mainly from writers working within post-structuralist theory, drawing on the works of Spinoza and Deleuze.
- 6 James and Eleanor Gibson were ecological psychologists who argued that experience was only comprehensible by studying the manner through which environments *afforded* particular modes of perception and experience.
- 7 See Darren Ellis and Ian Tucker's excellent overview of differing theories of emotions, in Ellis, D. & Tucker, I. (2014) *Social Psychology of Emotion*. London: Sage.
- 8 For a very insightful discussion of images within memory, see Anette Kuhn's text *Family Secrets* (1995/2002) London: Verso.
- 9 Silver and Reavey use the term 'diagnosed with BDD' to emphasise that BDD is a term used in clinical literature, not a term the authors consider to be an unproblematic or 'true' disorder/illness (see Cromby et al., 2013).
- 10 BDD is a psychiatric diagnosis, described as a distressing preoccupation with an imaginary or minor defect in a facial feature or localised part of the body.

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## The return to experience

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# PART I

## Static media

The use of photography in qualitative  
research



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## 2

# IMAGE AND IMAGINATION

*Alan Radley*

Any visual psychology should include within its concerns ‘the act of picturing’. This is something more than using pictures to access other topics of interest, which makes visual material merely illustrative of what is signified. While there is a place for research that uses pictures as a record, or even as a prompt to better interview material, this falls short of a critical approach to visual studies. A methodology that limits itself to analysing visual records as content – or worse still, to analysing verbal accounts about visual data – fails to address how people make sense *with* pictures as well as making sense of them.

I will pursue this line of argument by making a distinction between the terms *image* on the one hand, and *depiction* or *picture* on the other. The word *image* is often used interchangeably with other terms to mean ‘what the picture shows’, which is consistent with a copy theory of perception.<sup>1</sup> The use of the term to cover two separate entities – what is ‘in the photo’ and what is ‘inside the viewer’s head’ – can only lead to confusion when trying to understand what picturing involves (Mitchell, 1984). If one speaks to people about photographs that they have made, or even about ones they would like to have made, it soon becomes clear that the print is often an approximation of what they wanted to show but could not (Hodgetts et al., 2007). Or else the photograph can be said to capture the person exactly, so that the (mental) image one has of them somehow coheres with the (physical) depiction on the print. These two possibilities, along with others, are defined within a potential space of viewing that enables a consideration of making, showing and explaining using visual methods.

This possibility is soon revealed to anyone using visual methods as part of psychological research. Rather than being a problem to be avoided, the question of how people make pictures – as well as explain with them – provides a useful way of investigating some of the indeterminables in everyday life. For my part, as a social psychologist acknowledging the primacy of embodiment (e.g. in illness, in homelessness), approaching problems via photography is a way of foregrounding

the material settings in which people live their lives. This is not a reduction to the physicality of existence, but rather an attempt to hold still (for a moment) the fragments in which everyday experience attains psychological and social significance. It is not that the detail of physical settings is especially significant: rather, making and talking about a photograph can help explain or express (these are not the same thing) something that would otherwise be difficult to show about how we live in the world. It is in the context of this interest that the matter of pictures and images becomes salient, especially in relation to the use of visual methods in psychology more generally.

In order to further the distinction between images and depictions, I will discuss two examples of research using visual material, one involving photographs provided by an overseas aid agency, the other using photographs made by respondents themselves while in hospital. In the first study, people ranked, ordered and discussed a series of photographs used by UNICEF for fund raising, explaining which of the pictures would be more likely to spur them to give money for this cause (Radley and Kennedy, 1997). In the second study, patients who were on a surgical ward took photographs in hospital and then used these to talk about their experience, both at that time and later on when they were recuperating at home (Radley and Taylor, 2003a, 2003b).

Using pictures as an aid to interviewing is a well-established technique in social science, while getting people to take photographs of their situation and discuss these is an increasingly popular method (Collier, 2001; Pink, 2006). The first case – photo-elicitation – draws attention to the scenes or images pictured in the photographs, so that it is the content that appears for examination. The second – photo-production – treats the prints as evidence of the act of photography, so that how the pictures are produced and in what context are matters of central concern. These two options give rise to different but overlapping strategies for research. Rather than being static frames that enclose pictures of things, photographs made by respondents can be interrogated and justified from when they are taken (and even before that) through to the end of any subsequent interviews. This makes it possible to include the context of production as data, and hence reflect something of the action-frame of the researcher as well as the intentions of the respondents concerned.

This perspective is usefully related to Wright's (1999) distinction between readings that 'look at' and those that 'look behind' photographs, which in turn can be linked with accounts given by respondents and interpretations made by investigators. Both sets of people have the scope to look at and to look behind photographs, though from different positions. The analytic framework shown below allows us to unfold the ways in which respondents use visual imagery to mediate their understanding of their world. It can be summarised as shown in Table 2.1.

Importantly, just as interviews can be made *in the anticipation of* photographs to be taken, and then *on the basis of* prints being looked at, any analysis involving more than one investigator also has a conversational form. The accounts given and the interpretations made are then a result of a dialogic relationship between

Table 2.1 Approaches to using visual methods in social science research

	'Looking at'	'Looking behind'
Primarily told by respondent	Focus of the photo (intended content)	When taking the photograph
Primarily told by investigator	What the photos show – denote/express	The research aim – assumptions

different positions, not an outcome of prescribed movements from one person to the other. As interpretive practice, this comes near to Mitchell's description of representation as something assembled over time out of fragments, where these fragments might be considered as moments that are articulated into significance through the joint analytic process. The aim is to 'make materially visible the structure of representation as a trace of temporality and exchange, the fragments as mementos, as "presents" re-presented in the ongoing process of assemblage, of stitching in and tearing out' (1994: 419). This means that the aim of research becomes not so much an understanding *of* the pictures as an understanding *with* the photographs about the lives of the respondents concerned. A key part of this is that the act of research photography is itself an experiential fragment, providing a biopsy of the respondent's world.

### Good images and bad pictures

Investigating the way that people think about overseas aid, we showed a set of photographs (supplied by UNICEF) to a range of people from different backgrounds. There were three groups chosen – manual workers, business people and professionals. These included both men and women, with the majority being in the range 40–60 years of age (Radley and Kennedy, 1997). The aim of the study was to explore responses to photographs that show different degrees of need and dependency among people in developing countries.

What became apparent was that respondents reacted according to whether they judged the photographs to depict what (they believed) the agency was trying to show, or ought to show. The legibility of the pictures rested upon the degree to which the signifier (what was shown in the print) and the signified (in this case, needy individuals) phenomenally cohered. A picture of emaciated babies was judged as a 'good charity picture', this photo's *functional aesthetic* enabling the observer to endorse the camera's objective intention to offer an ethical judgement. By *functional aesthetic* Bourdieu (1990) referred to judgements made about a photograph on the basis of how 'well' it depicts its subject matter according to



cultural convention. ‘Good’ photographs are those that are clear, well composed, include what is relevant and exclude what is irrelevant, and enable an appropriate response from the viewer in that context. A ‘bad’ photograph is either technically lacking or depicts its subject inappropriately – where that appropriateness extends to the scope and direction of response invited from the viewer. Photographs that disturb, are unclear or are not understandable breach the conventions of the functional aesthetic. This shows that inspection of any photograph draws upon conventional ways of looking and of making pictures, a practice with which everyone in developed societies is familiar.

In this study respondents drew upon ‘rules of appropriateness’ for showing: how subjects should be pictured, in what contexts, with what decorum, as well as how they should be displayed and for what purposes. Using these criteria, some respondents picked out photographs from amongst the UNICEF set that they saw as being inappropriate. One photograph showed a group of smiling children playing near some oil drums, which one respondent thought looked rather like the kind of birthday card one could buy in a local shop. While she could see that the photograph showed clearly the children living in poor conditions, it yet failed to establish itself for her as an exemplar of a proper charity picture.

Another failure of a similar kind was attributed to one picture that was judged incompatible with the aim claimed by its inclusion in the UNICEF set. The photograph showed a teenage boy dressed as a soldier, carrying a gun and smoking a cigarette. As one respondent said, ‘if I had the authority I would tear that photograph up and throw it away’. In this case the inappropriateness of the picture touched upon contradictory signifiers concerning race and childhood, as well as perceived need. For that reason, some respondents cared more that the boy in the picture held a cigarette than that he carried a gun.

While this discussion of ‘kinds of’ pictures implies that different genres are mutually exclusive, we found that an image purportedly belonging to one sphere was sometimes intensified in its meaning by comparison with images from another. The following quotation illustrates this point, being part of an answer to a question about which photographs might prompt this particular woman respondent to give. (She had said earlier on in the interview that she always turned the page at pictures of starving children.)

Well, the one that I was thinking about this morning, because I was thinking about you [the interviewer] coming ... And the photograph that sums it up – the problem for me is not – it wasn’t a photograph for charity, it was the Vietnamese picture of the girl covered in napalm. But I think that is what a lot of the – the aid people took – the idea of that photograph. And used it in other – and used it in other ways. But that is the photograph that – that says it all. But it’s also the one that makes me think, ‘No, I can’t bear it’. I don’t want to believe that the world is like that. But that’s the photograph that sums it up, although I know that [it] was taken as a news photograph.

*(Female, bookseller)*

### *Image and imagination*

People are aware of how pictures are used, of the various genres of representation employed and of the expected cultural reactions to pictures of various kinds. In the charitable giving study, what they made of these photographs – what they said about them – was framed in terms of these considerations, along with feelings about the pictures that they could not easily articulate. Features that were picked out in the photographs were used as part of a justification of culturally held views about need, desert, the developing world and ethnic differences. These features were also used as referents in the respondents' accounts of their own views, intentions and experiences.

Compare these two excerpts relating to a photograph showing two girls, smiling, drawing water from a mechanical pump (Figure 2.1). The first quote is from a woman who was suspicious of requests for support overseas, and the second from a man who had experience of visiting Africa and said he understood the need for help.



*Figure 2.1* Girls at pump  
(credit: UNICEF).

Erm – well, the children seem happy. They’ve got a smile on their face. Because usually, when you see them on telly, they haven’t. And they’ve got water and that ... usually, when it’s shown on telly, they’ve got no water, they’re in these sorts of puddles, trying to get water out, what’s covered in – God knows what.

the water, I would see this as very positive. Again, because it involves ... the involvement of children who are obviously poor. Having seen people pushing barrows of water around Kenya, miles and miles, to provide water for villages, it has a personal attachment. And the faces are familiar, in that I can imagine the sort of faces that people – would find it, not having to push their barrow five miles, or whatever – they have access to a pump, and clean water

The difference between the two excerpts concerns not just the background experience that the respondents bring to the viewing, but also the way that they articulate their views by reference to different parts of the photograph. In the case of the woman, she notes the girls’ ‘smile on their face’, which suggests to her their relative advantage compared with other pictures she has seen of distressed children. Again, the possibility of distress depicted in the photograph is consistent with the idea of charity photographs having a functional aesthetic that legitimates feelings of pity on the part of the viewer. In contrast to this, the man notes the girls’ poverty, so that their smiles (though he does not mention them) are consistent with need that has been relieved in some way. What we concluded from this was that,

their accounts were ways of ‘making the world sensible’, using the visual material to define their own location with respect to a world that is ‘as it should be’. The analysis showed how some people emphatically rejected particular photographs on the grounds that they portrayed all too vividly a state of social affairs that the observer did not wish to entertain. By the same token, other accounts showed that liked pictures were those that enabled a preferred sense of the world to be put forward, including an identity for the speaker that warranted a place in such a positive ‘order of things’. From this perspective, the image is not so much read out of the photograph as it is fashioned in the course of ‘world-making by sense-making’.

(Radley and Kennedy, 1997: 453)

The ‘image’ referred to in this quotation is not the ‘image on the print’, but rather the affective attitude or overall response that people made to a picture; how they handled it, their expressions of liking and disliking, distaste etc. The responses that respondents conveyed about the photographs were sometimes closer (in the sense of liking), sometimes further away from the depictions shown, depending upon how comfortable they were with the photograph. What was mentioned, highlighted or downplayed in terms of the print content depended upon the *imaginary* relationship between the viewer and the subject that respondents

articulated. This relationship was imaginary in the sense that respondents had to *envision* the world in which they and the people in the photographs were contained, to anticipate their actions in relation to them and to justify the position they had taken on such matters in the past. That is what is meant in saying that ‘the image is ... fashioned in the course of “world-making by sense-making”’, where what is seen in the photograph is made meaningful in the course of justifying the viewer’s relationship to the people depicted. In the course of this justification the ‘image’ is explicated by reference to the print, so that what the picture is said to show justifies the affective relationship that the viewer has to the material being offered.

On the basis of this analysis, the image that is formed of any single photograph – or photographs as a set – is not to be confused with the depictions in the pictures. Nor is the image to be reduced to the words that respondents use to articulate and to justify their positions about need and its monetary relief. In this study these photographs, like others, occupied a double role in the demands they placed upon respondents. First, they brought before viewers events ‘that had happened’; this sometimes led to feelings (some contradictory) that respondents could not predict they would experience. Second, they provided definite resources on which viewers could draw in order to articulate into significance their relationship to the subject. The organisation of what was depicted in the photographs, and the viewer’s relationship to the subjects portrayed therein, were constituted together in the justification of the act of viewing. Experientially, the bringing together of past experiences, together with the need to justify one’s reaction in the present *is the image* that the respondent holds.

Why should it matter whether we separate out image from depiction in this way? It matters because it moves the argument away from a concern with interpretation of what is ‘there in the picture’ to one of explaining how we communicate, using pictures, about the images we have of the world. Or to put it another way, it highlights how we ‘make visible or keep hidden through representation’ those things that enable a relationship to others, or a world-view to be brought into being. Pictures of needy people do a certain kind of work because they make particular cultural demands upon the viewer; these demands are met by envisioning the kind of world in which such pictures arise, are sustained or might be discredited. The resultant ‘image’ is what the viewer is left with *after the photograph has been removed*.

### **Respondents become photographers**

Asking people to take and then talk about their photographs is a link forged between the world of the investigator and the world of the respondent (Table 2.1). This is because the aims of the research are conveyed in the instructions to people about how to take pictures, and may become realised in the conversations that investigator and respondent have about the photographs under consideration. By taking the camera the respondent first becomes an extension of the investigation, an interpreter of the requirements of how the study is to be conducted. By

returning with the photographs she/he satisfies what has been asked of him or her, and yet supplies pictures that 'go beyond' what the investigator has asked for.

To talk about photographs one has taken is to make claims for them – to explain, interpret and ultimately take responsibility for them. This is a matter of accounting for acts of production where the camera catches more than anticipated and omitted what might have been intended. As Mitchell (1994: 421) has pointed out, a break or gap between representation and responsibility is not only possible but also a structural necessity, in that the photograph cannot explain itself. Into this gap falls every possibility about telling about pictures, being subject to the constraints and opportunities offered by the context in which viewing takes place. We might think of this gap as a discursive space that is opened by the act of photography, a potential for naming not just what is there to be seen, but also what is barely shown, unclear or even beyond the edge of the picture (Hodgetts et al., 2007).

It is important to note that the ways in which people talk about photographs they have taken themselves is not simply a description of what is given on the print. It is a justification of the act of picturing, in which what is claimed is sustained or supported by reference to features pictured. These justifications will often relate to the reasons and ways of producing the photograph. This includes not only the rationale of the investigation but also cultural knowledge about photography, about 'research' and the interests of needy people, as discussed above, or of hospital patients, as will be discussed below. In studies using photo-production the 'responsibilities of telling' are actualised in the transaction of request/compliance that the research involves. The agreement to be a participant in research – and to act accordingly – is not outside of the participants' understanding of being, for example, a hospital patient or a potential donor to charity. This is a further reason to comprehend how the production of photographs is integral to the descriptions made of them that are offered by respondents in any research investigation.

To illustrate this, consider a photograph shown here (Figure 2.2), the first of two taken in hospital by a woman some seven days after she had undergone abdominal surgery (Radley and Taylor, 2003a). This is what she said about the picture during an interview conducted two days later in her home:

This one isn't a very nice picture for me. It has bad memories. I took this picture because I was in a bit of trouble one night – I think it was the second night after my operation. And (pause) I was struggling a little bit. Well, I wasn't too happy because I had already asked for assistance two or three times, and sort of been brushed aside, saying 'we'll come in a minute'. What it was was that I was bleeding from one of my wounds, so to speak, and by the time they got round to seeing me I was in a bit of a state. In the end I tried to walk to the toilet myself – to the bathroom – and with all my pipes and my – what do you call it? – [Interviewer: drips] – drips, and of course I was trying to sort of change myself with all the pipes mixed up and I was getting into a bit of a state. So one



*Figure 2.2* Bathroom  
(author's own photograph).

of the patients came in and saw me and said: 'Oh dear, you are in a bit of a state aren't you?' So she went to fetch one of the nurses and then she came to help me out. Now that was the really only bad feeling I had while I was in there, and I was really upset because I felt really alone then, you know, because there was nobody there to help me and a feeling of uselessness.

Here is the story behind the picture, if you like. The account describes the series of events that made up the situation prompting the photograph, and the parts played by the patient and others in what occurred. It has narrative form in providing a plot, the different roles played by the actors involved, the narrator's evaluation of people's actions and a description of the temporal and spatial setting in which this all took place. She says that 'it isn't a very nice picture' for her, and that it has 'bad memories'. This keys the story as a remembered event whose significance is locatable in the pictures that had been brought to her home.

This is not a neutral image on to which a painful story was eventually grafted. The qualities of the experience are apparently there in the picture when she looked at it. In saying this, I am not trying to elevate the picture above the story she tells, but to indicate that, for her, the story is somehow anchored to the photograph. In spite of that, what she sees in that picture – on the photographic print – is hardly

mentioned. There is mention of the toilet and the bathroom – the place depicted – but she gives no description of the photograph at all. Instead, the account is redolent of what we would expect from narrative, in that she tells of having asked for assistance from a nurse, of it not being forthcoming, of going to the bathroom where another patient recognises her need and calls for a nurse who does eventually come to help her. The words take over. Listening to the story, we do not actually need to see the bathroom to understand what is being told, and I am not really sure that our perception of the photographs is much changed once we have heard it. Here was where this happened, but we see no patients or nurses in the picture, no dressings or wounds, no drips or pipes. For us as third parties, the image has a forensic quality to it, rather like a picture of the scene of a crime (Benjamin, 1970).

However, something else is going on in this narrative as well as emplotment, temporal sequencing and the presentation of an, albeit small, moral universe. There are several descriptions of her condition (struggling, bleeding, bit of a state, of feeling upset and alone). These feelings are related in her story to the actions (or non-actions) of others but are not totally consequent upon them. Her condition, her suffering at that moment, *is* the condition for the story, and is given to us in the descriptive passage that says: ‘with all my pipes and my – what do you call it? – drips’. ‘What it was was that I was bleeding from one of my wounds.’ She goes on to describe walking to the bathroom and changing herself with all these pipes getting mixed up. To use a leading expression, she paints a picture of her situation that depicts what getting into a bit of a state means in that bathroom, with all those pipes attached to her.

When first looking at the photograph she said, it ‘isn’t a very nice picture for me. It has bad memories’. What the picture depicts for her are spaces and objects that she experienced in the course of struggling with her pipes and drips. These depictions are not neutral, because they have acquired the power to stare back at her, even if they do not have this power over us, the viewers. In this they are more than depictions of the site of her misfortune, because they are integral with her image of her time in hospital, an image grounded in her struggles when she was frightened. None of this is ‘in’ the picture to be read out by anybody else, nor is it even guaranteed by listening to her story.

The woman makes use of the picture of the bathroom to tell in another way, by means of the photograph. In this way she articulates into significance the bare spaces and objects depicted. What is being told is actually not about the picture and its content per se but the experience of that room *made possible by her having photographed it*. I am suggesting that the room (which for her is an experienced setting, not a neutral, physical space) was *re-figured* in the act of taking a photograph of it. Let us not forget that taking photographs of one’s hospital ward is quite unusual. It is no less than turning upon the technologies and apparatuses of the hospital system. It is this, the act of making the photographs, of turning upon the ward environment to mark her time in the hospital that she takes into account (takes into *the* account). It is not just the happening of events in the bathroom that is being discussed here: it is ‘the bathroom pictured’ that needs to be justified in

her story. In fact, she took a second picture of the doorway – not shown here – from the inside out, to show (and to recapture?) the leaving of this space and its episode of distress.

We might say that the moment of photography is a kind of resistance to the flow of hospital experience. This resistance is essentially there when she looks at the print – the print is proof of the moment that the picture was taken. But it is more than this. The act of photography also re-makes another moment, a momentous one. It is a constructive act through which she imagines – conjures – her previous experience in that room. It is this act of *imagining* that produces the photograph as its trace. The trace of the physical setting alone is all that is there to be seen by us, the viewers, but the ‘image of her suffering’ is what makes the photograph meaningful to her. This image is not there to be seen, but is what she told us about by reference to the photograph. Her story is a transform, if you like, of ways of symbolising this experience that have been made possible by the act of picturing this setting.

Whether this woman could have or would have told this story without the aid of the photographs we cannot be sure. I feel certain that she would have told *some* story about this event, because it stood out in her experience of her hospital stay. However, whether she would have told us some of the other stories elicited with the aid of the photographs that she took is far less certain. The act of photography makes a difference because the story then told is built upon this other (visual) way of representing the world. This world is always represented, but is one not always represented in *just this way*. Essential meaning is not located in her story any more than it is located in the photographs. Meaning and significance are distributed across these media, so that pictures and words together provide opportunities for both presentational knowing and discursive explanation.

I said earlier that when looking at ‘pictures of need’ respondents communicated how comfortable they were with the (imaginary) world that these photographs invoked for each of them. Describing what the pictures showed was part of making closer or more distant their relationship to the people depicted, and to the values they engaged. In the case of the photographs made by this woman patient, she was concerned to explain (while still keeping distant) a painful moment during her time in hospital. How does this relate to images and their place in the use of visual methodologies? We might concur with Bartlett that her image of the moment described a stage in the act of remembering, ‘characterised by doubt, hesitation, surprise, astonishment, confidence, dislike, repulsion and so on’ (1932: 207). These terms are worth repeating in full in order to show their implications for what can be described in a photograph: what can be ‘remembered about’, and what can be ‘remembered for’. In Bartlett’s terms the ‘memory image’ that arises is an extensive scheme, referring to an affective relationship in a setting, often elusive to explication.

Seen in this way, the woman treated her photographs as visual cues to the setting (i.e. bathroom) from which they were *deliberately* sampled. This setting was more than the physical context of the bathroom, more than a place and



time, even. It refers to ‘an affective relationship’, the image that she wanted to convey, and which the act of photography engaged through enabling her to re-imagine it. Her photograph served, therefore, as a transform, a mediating device for communicating about a distressing moment. An important part of its value was to provide a way of envisaging that moment once again, but *in a different way*. This different way was not for her ‘to suffer again’ but to be able to articulate the image of distress that remained with her after discharge. Rather, like other patients, she made use of her photographs as bridges to and from an imagined projection of recovery from illness (Radley and Taylor, 2003b). In that sense, it is insufficient to speak of her ‘reading’ her photographs, or even ‘placing an interpretation’ upon them.

## Conclusion

Making a distinction between image and photograph, and removing the idea of image from picture content, hopefully encourages us to ‘look behind’ as well as to ‘look at’ photographs. It alerts us to the need to investigate not just what pictures show, but the *act of picturing*, its potential and its limitations. It moves us away from the view that photographs show what is there (a realist view), or that the content of pictures is sufficient as data. It also questions the idea that photographs are simply talked into being, so that an analysis of talk about pictures provides, on its own, an adequate investigation of their potential. If psychologists are to look behind pictures, it is to the practices of showing that they should attend, so that how people make sense with pictures becomes important.

Earlier I used the term ‘action-frame of research’ when discussing what respondents believe is expected of them. The idea of justifying why a person took particular pictures, why that content, in this way rather than that, or failed to show what they really wanted to show, is part of the present demands that any study of sense-making must meet. This means that understanding how people use photographs should include some consideration of the requirements placed on respondents by the researcher, and (equally important), some statement by the researcher of the status in which the pictures are held (Wagner, 2006). From what I have said above, it follows that there is no such thing as a photograph – existing neutrally – outside of action frames in which they are made and viewed. There are, instead, pictures being made, shown, explained and even hidden. What makes visual media psychologically significant is that they are, along with text, another means of communicating what cannot be shown directly about our dealings with the world and with each other; in a sense, they help to provide a vision of what cannot be visualised.

## Note

1 I have to say that I have not always maintained this distinction in my previous writing.

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### 3

## BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM?

### The challenges of reading gender and visual culture

*Rosalind Gill*

#### **Introduction**

It is now more than 30 years since – on TV screens across the UK – Nick Kamen was seen strolling into a retro-looking launderette and slowly and suggestively removing his clothes, to the soulful soundtrack of Marvin Gaye singing ‘I heard it through the grapevine’. This advert for Levis 501s was so successful that – according to legend – the factories producing the jeans struggled to keep up with the resulting 700% increase in demand. For cultural analysts, however, it was the impact of this advert on representations of men that made it so significant. It inaugurated – or at least became the iconic example of – an ongoing transformation in depictions of the male body, a shift that seemed to overturn the unwritten rule of visual culture in which, as John Berger famously put it, ‘men look and women appear’. Since that moment back in 1985, men’s bodies have been ‘on display’ in the mediascape as never before: oiled ‘sixpacks’ stare back at us from magazine covers, superwaifs mince along the fashion catwalk and beautiful young male bodies are offered up for our consumption in any number of advertising campaigns on billboards, television or the cinema screen. Rather than men being simply ‘bearers of the look’ (Mulvey 1975), as an earlier generation of feminist film scholars argued (Kaplan 1987; Doane 1992), men’s bodies are now regularly and routinely portrayed as objects of the gaze, visually depicted for their ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (in a manner previously reserved for women).

In this chapter I want to look back at this shift in the depiction of male bodies, and also at the critical writing that discussed it. For some analysts the representation of men as sexual objects in sites across mainstream popular culture represented nothing short of the fracturing of patriarchy, indeed of heteronormativity, and the binary of sexual difference itself (Simpson 1994; Mort 1996). Others, however, were more sceptical, and sought to show how, despite an *apparent* equalisation in sexual objectification, idealised-eroticised representations of men were constructed in such a way as to allow men symbolically to hold on to power (Dyer 1982; Neale 1993).

Here I want to re-engage with these important but somewhat neglected debates to do three things. First, to ask how we might read visual culture, and specifically, what theoretical, methodological, cultural and political vocabularies might enable us to critically engage with representations of the male body/male bodies? Second, and following from this, I want to ask whether, after more than three decades in which sexualised representations of the male body have been an increasing feature of mainstream popular culture, we are now seeing significant shifts in the way the male body is depicted? To that end, I will discuss two advertising campaigns, which seem – potentially – to encode different meanings about masculinity from the earlier representations of muscular manhood. In particular I will look at images from Armani's (2007/8) campaign featuring David Beckham, and Dolce & Gabbana's (2007) Light Blue advertising campaign starring model David Gandy. Do these campaigns constitute a break or shift in depictions of the male body? And if so, in what ways? I will then examine some newer trends in representing male bodies – seen particularly since 2015.

Finally I want to raise the question of whether, in the wake of the ongoing sexualised presentation of the male body in popular culture – and particularly the more recent examples – ‘we are all equally objectified now?’ I have not seen any critical writing about this, but it's frequently voiced in the media with assertions that ‘men are the new women’; that men are now vilified and attacked in advertising in ways that would not be permitted if it were women, and even calls for a Minister for Men to look after their (allegedly neglected) rights. It is something my students – who have largely grown up in visual landscapes in which the sexualised display of men's bodies is taken for granted – say to me often: any claim I might make about the objectification of women will be met with the response ‘but men are equally objectified’.

I have long been interested in the way in which this claim functions rhetorically to silence concerns about the representation of women, but I believe also that it does need to be taken seriously in its own terms. Do ‘we’ want to argue that representations of women constitute more of a cause for concern or anger than those of men? And if so – if feminists (including me) want to continue to argue that the objectification of women is different (read ‘worse’) than that of men – then we need to be able to say *what it is that makes the difference*, rather than simply assert it is so. How might we do so in a way that is principled and has integrity? Are the differences that exist ones that can be identified through *formal visual analysis of the images* themselves (looking, for example, at *mise en scène*, posture, gaze, degree of flesh exposed, etc.), or is it a question of the *volume of the representations*? Or, more broadly, do we also have – simultaneously – to read *culture, subjectivity and history* in order to advance such arguments? In reading visual culture, then, how might we think about the relationship between the texts themselves and the context in which they appear?

### ***In a world ordered by sexual difference ...***

This question has been central to many debates about visual culture since Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking article ‘Visual pleasure and narrative cinema’, published in (1975). Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Mulvey's aim was to investigate the ways in which the cinematic apparatus operates psychically to produce meanings and

modes of spectatorial subjectivity organised around sexual difference. Mulvey was writing about classical Hollywood cinema – a set of institutional practices and textual forms which were at their height in the period between the 1930s and 1950s. Textually, the films were usually built around two intertwined narratives: the generic story (solving a crime, rescuing someone, putting on a show, etc.) and a heterosexual love story. In a detailed psychoanalytic exposition, Mulvey argued that visual pleasure in classical Hollywood cinema was built around two contradictory processes: scopophilia, or pleasure in looking, and narcissism. One involved a separation and distancing from the figures on the screen, the other demanded identification. Mulvey argued that these pleasures became structured by a heterosexual division of labour: the woman is passive, there as a display, to be looked at; the man is a protagonist, driving forward the narrative. As she famously put it:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between the active male and passive female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to striptease ... she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.

*(Mulvey 1975: 11)*

However, Mulvey's point was not simply that the woman displayed is there as an erotic object for the male protagonist of the film, but also that she becomes as such for the audience. Three masculine gazes – the gaze of the camera, the gaze of the male protagonist within the film and the gaze of the cinema spectators – map on to each other, leading inevitably to the objectification of women.

Mulvey's work generated a huge amount of debate that has both critiqued and developed her ideas. Critical engagement has focused on the lack of an address to an active female gaze or spectating position, and on dissatisfaction with the notion that the only options for women were to identify with a masculine position (in a sort of psychic transgending) or to take up a feminine – necessarily masochistic – position. Critics also pointed to the problematic elision of masculine spectating positions with cis male subjects, as well as to its privileging of gender – or sexual difference – above all other axes of identity (such as age, sexual orientation, race or class). Mulvey's work has also been criticised for its rather universalising and deterministic assumptions about the functioning of filmic texts. Against this, much contemporary work on media and visual culture stresses the polysemic nature of texts and the possibility of multiple, contradictory and shifting readings and identifications. As John Ellis (1992) argued, identification is never simply a matter of men identifying with male figures on screen and women identifying with females. Cinema involves many forms of fluid desire that may transgress identities, positions and roles. Moreover it is clearly possible for us as viewers to identify with multiple characters, not just one.

In relation to display of the male body, Mulvey's work is notable for its argument that men are bearers, not object, of the gaze, and for the suggestion – much developed in later work – that women are narratively punished for actively desiring men in the film. Only musicals escaped this because, she argued, in musicals *spectacle* took precedence over *narrative* [see also Gaylyn Studlar (1992) on Rudolf Valentino and Steve Cohan (1992) on Fred Astaire].

If active (heterosexual) female desire was disavowed, so too was homoerotic male desire – which might after all be produced in men by the invitation to identify with powerful and glamorous male protagonists. A number of strategies have been identified in films that might be said to lessen the anxieties associated with this: e.g. the 'reassuring' depiction of a woman, the use of humour (especially in locker-room scenes), through explicit disavowals, as well as through the presence of excessive violence or mutilation (Neale 1993). If women are *punished* narratively for desiring, men are *tested*, and this testing sometimes enables the production of a set of eroticised images of the male body to be depicted. As Yvonne Tasker (1993) succinctly puts it: 'torture operates in the narrative as a test for the hero to survive, but also as a set of aestheticised images to be lovingly dwelt on'.

Tasker was writing about the proliferation of action movies and spectacular male heroes which came out of Hollywood in the late 1980s and 1990s, rather than the 'classical' earlier period. It was already clear that depictions of the male body were changing radically in film – but also in advertising, fashion, magazines and other parts of visual culture. What changed in the mid-1980s was not simply the *volume* of representations of the male body but, more importantly, the representational strategies used to depict it. Whilst there had long been depictions of attractive men in popular culture – from screen matinee idols to the rugged 'Marlboro man' – what marked the shift was the new (re)presentation of men as *objects of the gaze* rather than simply bearers of the look. Nick Kamen's striptease in the launderette, the rise of dance/stripping troops such as the Chippendales, the emergence into the mainstream of publications such as *For Women*, the sudden explosion of fashion imagery from men ... all these were indications of a profound shift in visual culture in which men's bodies – like women's – could be offered up to us 'to be looked at'.

### **Reading the shift**

Over the last two decades a considerable body of writing has explored this shift, from several different angles. One tradition of research has examined the *catalysts* for this transformation in depictions of the male body. At a general level the representations were understood as part of the shift away from the 'male as norm' in which masculinity lost its unmarked status and became visible as gendered. Sally Robinson (2000) argues that white masculinity was rendered visible through pressure from black and women's liberation movements which were highly critical of its hegemony. A variety of new social movements galvanised the creation of the 'new man', the reinvention of masculinity along more gentle, emotional and communicative lines. More specifically, the growing confidence of the gay liberation movement in Western countries, and the increasing significance of the 'pink economy' helped to produce a greater range of

representations of the male body in gay magazines and popular culture (Chapman 1988; Mort 1996; Nixon 1996). Part of the shift can be understood in terms of these images 'going mainstream' and, as they did so, opening up space for an active gaze among heterosexual women (Moore 1988). The shift also had significant economic determinants: retailers, marketers and magazine publishers were keen to develop new markets and had affluent men in their sights as the biggest untapped source of high-spending consumers (Edwards 1997). Style magazines like *The Face* helped this enterprise by producing a new visual vocabulary for the representation of men's bodies, and this too opened up space for eroticised practices of representation (Mort 1996; Nixon 1996). As Rowena Chapman (1988) argued, 'new man' was a contradictory formation, representing both a response to critique from progressive social movements, and a gleam in the eyes of advertisers, marketers and companies aspiring to target young and affluent men. Perhaps the figure of the metrosexual that has come to prominence more recently symbolises the extent to which marketing-driven constructions won out over more explicitly political re-articulations of masculinity.<sup>1</sup>

A second trajectory of research has been concerned with the *implications* of the changing depictions of the male body. From within psychology, there has been interest in what impact the proliferation of idealised-eroticised images might have on young men's body image and self-esteem, with questions raised about the growing equalisation of 'pressures' – often refracted through a set of concerns about masculinity 'in crisis' (see Gill 2008). More sociological research has located the shift in relation to questions about body culture and identity, also raising questions about the relationship between representational practices and gender relations (Gill et al. 2000; Gill 2003).

But it is a third tradition of scholarship that I am most interested in here: a body of writing influenced by psychoanalytically informed feminist film criticism and art practice, queer theory and critical race studies, which looks critically at the *nature* of contemporary representations of the male body and the ways in which they may be organised to deal with the anxieties and threats produced by such a significant shift in visual culture. This work reads contemporary representations of men in intersectional terms as simultaneously gendered, racialised, classed, aged and intimately related to sexuality. It suggests that, far from there being a diverse range of representations of the male body in mainstream visual culture, most can be shown to conform to a very specific 'type'. The models are generally white, they are young, they are muscular and slim, they are usually clean-shaven (with perhaps the exception of a little 'designer stubble') and they have particular facial features which connote a combination of softness and strength – strong jaw, large lips and eyes and soft-looking, clear skin (Edwards 1997). As Tim Edwards (1997) has argued, this combination of muscularity/hardness and softness in the particular 'look' of the models allows them to manage contradictory expectations of men and masculinity as strong and powerful but also gentle and tender – they embody, in a sense, a cultural contradiction about what a man is 'meant to be'. The famous poster 'L'enfant' showing a muscular, bare-chested man cradling a baby perfectly exemplifies this, and was Athena's (the poster company) best-selling item for many years (Chapman and Rutherford 1988).

Older bodies are strikingly absent and there have historically been strong and persistent patterns of racialisation to be found in the corpus of images of the male body in advertising. White bodies are over-represented, but they are frequently not Anglo-American or northern European bodies, but bodies that are coded as 'Latin', with dark hair and olive skin, referencing long histories of sexual Othering and exoticism (Nixon 1996) (though this may be changing, particularly in the USA, where, in 2004, Abercrombie & Fitch settled a class action for racism out of court after accusations that its 'all American' image was all white, blonde and blue-eyed). Black African American and African Caribbean bodies are also regularly represented in an eroticised manner, but these bodies are usually still reserved for products associated with sport, drawing on long-held racist cultural myths about black male sexuality and physical prowess. It is also worth noting that adverts depicting black men frequently use black male *celebrities* (e.g. Tiger Woods, Thierry Henry), in contrast to the unknown models who are used when the 'sexy' body is white. As Peter Jackson (1994: 88) has argued, this does nothing to challenge the underlying racialised logic of representation, but in fact reinforces it by presenting the 'acceptable' face of black masculinity 'shorn of the more threatening associations of a stereotypically anonymous' black manhood. In contrast, male Asian bodies have rarely been presented in advertising as sexually desirable – again indexing different racist ideologies, this time of 'a-sexuality'. As I have argued elsewhere, class is also central to the construction and reading of such representations. The use of 'arthouse' techniques such as black and white photography or 'sculpted' models that make reference to classical iconography connotes affluence and sophistication, as well as offering a kind of distance to the consumption of such images.

Writing is polarised on the issue of how significant this shift in the portrayal of male bodies is. Some see in it a fundamental challenge to patriarchy and heteronormativity. Frank Mort (1996) argued that the objectification of men's bodies and the use of 'cropping' to focus upon selected, eroticised areas (e.g. upper arms, chest, 'sixpack') represents nothing less than the symbolic fracturing or fragmentation of male power. In turn, Mark Simpson predicted that male dominance and heterosexuality would not survive this transformation in visual culture:

Men's bodies are on display everywhere; but the grounds of men's anxiety is not just that they are being exposed and commodified but that their bodies are placed in such a way as to passively invite a gaze that is undifferentiated: it might be female or male, hetero or homo. Traditional male heterosexuality, which insists that it is always active, sadistic and desiring, is now inundated with images of men's bodies as passive, masochistic and desired. Narcissism, the desire to be desired, once regarded as a feminine quality par excellence, is, it seems, in popular culture at least, now more often associated with men than with women. Sexual difference no longer calls the shots, active no longer maps onto masculine, nor passive onto feminine. Traditional heterosexuality cannot survive this reversal: it brings masculinity into perilously close contact with that which must always be disavowed: homosexuality.

*(Simpson 1994: 15)*



Against this, however, a considerable body of work has examined the strategies used to *undercut or offset* the potential threat produced by depicting (white) male bodies in a manner more familiarly used for women. The early writing of Richard Dyer and Stephen Neale is particularly important, but has also been taken up by more recent work by Fowler (1996), Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and Schroeder (2007). What, then, are the strategies that appear to operate to offset the transgressiveness threatened?

On the one hand, many adverts use models with an almost 'phallic muscularity' – the size and hardness of the muscles 'standing in for' male power. Indeed, writing about an earlier generation of male pin-ups, Richard Dyer (1982) talked about representations of the male body having a 'hysterical' feel. Likewise, Susan Bordo (1997) argued that many male striptease routines tend to eroticise the teasing display of *male power* rather than the sexiness of the bodies themselves [but see her later argument in *The Male Body* (1999) and see also (Smith 2007)].

The posture and facial expressions of eroticised-idealised males in adverts also diminish the potential threats discussed by Simpson. Men tend not to smile or pout, nor to deploy any of the bodily gestures or postures discussed by Goffman (1979) as indices of the 'ritualised subordination' of women in advertising (canting, knee bends, being shown smaller or lying down, etc.), and nor are they depicted in mirror shots – so long a favoured mode for conveying women's narcissism. In contrast, in what I have elsewhere called 'sixpack advertising' (Gill 2009a), men are generally portrayed standing or involved in some physical activity. Moreover, they are mostly pictured alone in ways that reference the significance of independence as a value marking hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995), or they are pictured with a beautiful woman – to 'reassure' viewers of their heterosexuality.

However it is not *simply* the case that these representations must disavow homoerotic desire. On the contrary, gay men are a key target audience for such advertising representations, being acknowledged as fashion leaders in clothing, 'grooming' and the purchase of fragrances. Indeed, through the figure of the 'metrosexual', marketing professionals sought to re-articulate these interests in 'looking good' to a heterosexual agenda. The representations advertisers construct have to appeal simultaneously to (at least) three different constituencies: gay men, heterosexual women and heterosexual men – in such a way as not to antagonise, alienate or provoke anxiety in straight men. Discussing the way advertisers manage this, Tim Edwards (1997) highlights the paradoxical nature of men's magazines as a site for such images, pointing to the 'fundamentalist' assertion of heterosexuality in written texts juxtaposed with page after page of homoerotic images of the male body as one example of how this contradiction was managed, through a splitting that operated between the visual and written texts.

Attention to the organisation of gazes also points to differences with depictions of idealised-eroticised females in advertising – though this may be changing. Writing about this in a now-classic article in *Screen*, over 30 years ago, Dyer (1982) argued that male pin-ups tend to look back at the viewer in ways reminiscent of 'street' gazes to assert dominance, or they look up or off, indicating that their interests are elsewhere. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) distinguish between an *offer* and a *demand* in relation to gazes in visual images. When the model looks away from the camera this is an indirect

gaze that makes an offer to the spectator to become the subject of the gaze (that is, it offers him or her the possibility to render the model an object). In contrast, when the model looks directly at the camera it constitutes a direct address that is a demand, they argue. However, as I argue elsewhere (Gill 2010), this split between subject and object is problematic, particularly when it is mapped on to gender in a seemingly straightforward manner. I have discussed this in relation to representations of women, arguing that one key feature of what I have called the shift from objectification to sexual subjectification is this change in gazes: compared to earlier eras years ago, women in adverts are much more likely to look directly – to address or tease the viewer – a shift that is underwritten by textual cues that stress women’s assertiveness, independence and playfulness. Yet, as I have argued, the written or spoken texts operate as an alibi for ‘sexualised’ representations which, without them, would be much more likely to garner attacks for sexism (Gill 2009a).

In addition to the threats posed by homoeroticism, there are anxieties related specifically to gender hierarchy – namely to the presentation of male bodies as objects of a heterosexual female gaze. The anxieties threatened here are often dealt with through humour. This can be seen in the well-known advert for Diet Coke on British television (and elsewhere) in which the camped up, exaggerated desire of the women (depicted in over-the-top state of sexual anticipation, with much heavy breathing, biting of lips and re-arranging of hair) and the comic nature of the ‘11 o’clock appointment’ serve to place the scene in humorous, ironic quotation marks – plus the ‘comedic’ reversal of use of a labourer, the embodiment of a white working-class version of sexism [see also Buchbinder’s (1998) discussion of similar ads].

Interestingly, advertisers have also started to deploy strategies designed to appease men’s anger at being addressed by idealised images (in a way that parallels what happened in relation to women – i.e. L’Oréal’s ‘Don’t Hate Me because I’m Beautiful’ campaign): a Nivea skin balm advert shows a blue-eyed blonde man with the slogan ‘his good looks may be irritating, but his skin isn’t’. Does this suggest an increasing similarity in modes of address and visual depiction of men and women? I will return to this in the final part of the paper, but first want to turn to ways in which representations of men’s bodies in adverts are changing.

### **Beyond ‘sixpack advertising’? When Armani met Beckham**

Thirty years after Nick Kamen’s invitation to watch as he undressed, it seems to me that idealised-eroticised images of men in visual culture (especially advertising) are changing. In 2003 an advert for Yves St Laurent broke taboos by using a naked man to promote a fragrance. Almost as significant was another advert showing a model with abundant body and facial hair – marking a departure from earlier, more typical representations that are ‘manscaped’, to use the current parlance. Thinner, more vulnerable-looking models have also become more popular – in contrast to the muscular ‘sixpacks’ I have discussed elsewhere (Gill 2009a). A campaign for Dolce & Gabbana also broke the mould in 2006 with a series of strikingly homoerotic locker-room adverts, in which, rather than being pictured

alone, a group of men (members of the Italian football team) are shown posing together in tight-fitting underpants, their sexy bodies oiled, in one case even touching.

In 2007/8 two campaigns were launched which seemed to underscore the shift in representational practice and raise questions about ongoing transformations of visual culture. In an advert for the Dolce & Gabbana fragrance Light Blue, model David Gandy is shown reclining in the sun, his crotch occupying centre shot (Figure 3.1). While some features of the representation remain similar to the 'sixpack' – particularly the accentuated muscularity of the arms, the oiled hardness of the body and the nature of the model's gaze – the advert is notable for the relatively 'passive' depiction, the centring and prominence of the genitals (so often previously hysterically 'evoked' rather than shown – see Dyer) and the conventionally 'feminine' pose adopted (in fact, an almost identical pose is adopted by a female model in the 'sister' advert for the women's version of this fragrance).

The same year, the first in a series of adverts for Armani underwear featuring David Beckham was launched to an avalanche of press coverage (Figure 3.2). This is how the British paper *The Guardian* covered it:

Last week we got a sneak peek of one of the most iconic advertising images of 2008. Of course I'm talking about that piece of art-cum-porn for Emporio Armani's underwear featuring David Beckham – his chiselled face and perfect pecs and oiled abs and lean thighs, but mainly, and most prominently, his Armani underpanted groin.

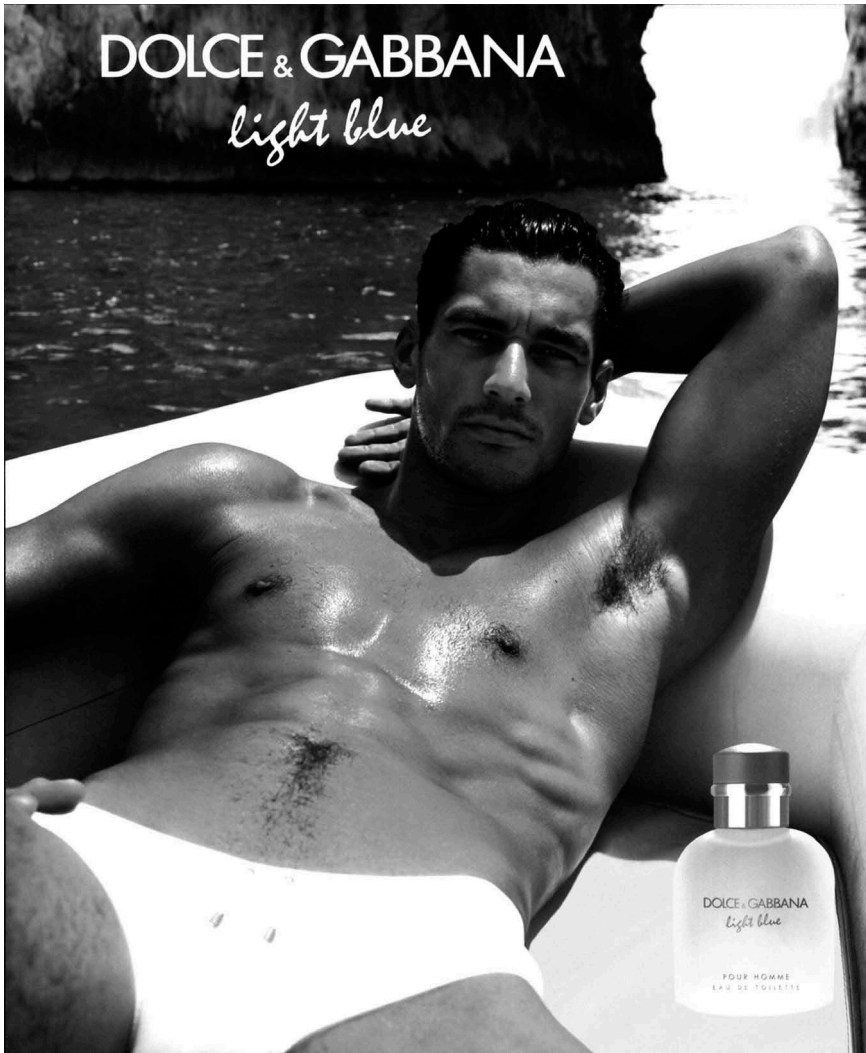
(Ramchandani 2007)

Media coverage focused on the traffic-stopping qualities of this image (Sibbles 2009), the breathless reactions of the many thousands of fans who came to see the giant versions of the adverts unveiled in locations such as New York's Times Square or London's Oxford Street, the explicit sexiness of the advert and its possible impact on men, with the potential to 'make an entire gender feel inadequate' (MacInnes 2010) – a theme that was heightened when Cristiano Ronaldo was hired as the new face/body of Armani in 2010.

The centring of the groin in all of these campaigns is significant. Ten years earlier, in the UK an underwear campaign for Brass Monkeys was removed by the Committee of Advertising Practice for being 'unsuitable for public consumption' because it focused explicitly on the model's groin and turned him into a 'sex object' (Jobling 2003). That this is no longer the case is an indication that something has changed, and helps to account for the reactions of those who claim men and women are 'equally objectified' now, and indeed that 'being reduced to a quivering jelly of insecurity is no longer just for women', as one journalist put it (MacInnes 2010).

According to some readings, the 'exposure' of the penis (or at least its outline, tightly clad) should translate into an exposure and demystification of male power – along the lines of the feminist postcard of the 1970s in which line drawings of a girl and boy shown peering into their underpants is given the caption 'so is that all that explains the difference in our pay?'

*Bend it like Beckham?*



*Figure 3.1* A ‘feminised’ pose?  
(Source: The Advertising Archives).

Yet an alternative way of reading these images is not as an exposure or deconstruction of male power, but as its teasing, thrusting display. Far from equalising the gender politics of representation, of revealing male power as the masquerade, perhaps these newer groin shots in fact represent a celebration of phallic power? This would be redolent of the scenarios discussed by Rachel O’Neill (2010), witnessing the reactions of male cinema audiences to the film *Top Gun*, in which the slogan ‘worship the cock’ was apparently spontaneously chanted.



Figure 3.2 Breaking the mould for representing men?  
(Source: The Advertising Archives).

The sheer size of the groin shots on hoardings outside Selfridges, Macy's and other key locations might be said to underscore such a reading. Victoria Beckham is said to have commented that she was 'proud to see his penis 25 feet tall. It's enormous. Massive' [quoted in (Fisher 2008)].

This points to the complexities of reading the image. On the one hand, heterosexual female sexual agency seems to be given space in a way that marks a significant rupture with previous representations; yet on the other, this is reframed less in terms of *desire* than *admiration*, in a way that seems to reinstate or even heighten unequal gender power relations. 'It's about shock and awe and phallus-worship', as one friend put it, highlighting the way in which the images were apprehended in terms of traditional masculine concerns about size and performance. Moreover, the focus on Victoria Beckham's reaction – that of the *wife* – seems to attempt to position the advert within a heteronormative economy, in which Beckham's groin is acceptable precisely because it is a sportsman's, a father's and above all a *heterosexual groin* (notwithstanding Beckham's status as a gay icon and metrosexual).

It may well be, as Paul Jobling has argued in relation to an earlier generation of underwear advertising, that the meanings are 'not so easily or safely contained' (2003: 148), but nevertheless the homophobia of some of the coverage is striking. Martin Kelner (2009), writing in the British liberal daily *The Guardian*, asserted 'these are confusing times for followers of the national game ... shots of an oiled up David

Beckham modelling Armani underpants will have some of us sporting our bobble hats and rattles a little uncomfortably'. Perhaps such a frank acknowledgement of the discomforting experience of being confronted in public places with large homoerotic images is itself a marker of change – for in an earlier era even the homoeroticism would have been disavowed entirely. Yet at the same time with the acknowledgement comes a further enactment of heterosexuality; the expression of anxiety *itself* perhaps a new way of 'doing heterosexual masculinity', a mode of what I have called 'new homophobia', part of a wider trend in 'confessional' 'lad lit' and 'lad flicks' which plays with anxieties about both homosexuality *and* homophobia (Gill 2009b; Hansen-Miller and Gill 2010). This new knowing or 'ironic' homophobia (which, it should be noted, has not displaced but co-exists with 'older' forms) is seemingly less an attack on an existent sexual minority than a self-deprecating 'joke' about the homosexual potentials of heterosexual men, which seems to both do and undo patriarchal power and heteronormativity

### **New trends**

What is clear is how complicated the terrain of visual culture has become; how difficult it is to 'read' these representations of masculinity. Besides the shifts already discussed, a variety of other factors is influencing the depiction of men's bodies in visual culture. First, the rise of visually dominated social media, and the vast expansion of self representation as a cultural phenomenon. Jamie Hakim (2016) argues that the proliferation of sports and sex-related selfies is producing a novel cultural formation that might be characterised as 'spornosexual' – a portmanteau term that connects sport and pornography. Instagram hashtags including #fitness, #fitspo and #muscle host millions of images, many of them self-portraits of men displaying their bodies. Hakim connects this to the longer-term trend for the body to become a project of the self – something that he argues is heightened by increasing poverty and austerity post the financial crisis. In this context men are pushed to find other forms of value, including body work which was formerly associated with women.

The broader cultural politics of race and diversity has also impacted the kinds of images of men on display. In the UK there is now a far greater range of images of black and brown male bodies in consumer culture – particularly men of African and/or Caribbean heritage. This is connected to transformations in sport (particularly football) and in music, including the huge popularity of rap, R&B and grime. An example is Nike's 2018 advert 'Nothing beats a Londoner', which features 258 'ordinary Londoners' – the vast majority of whom are young and black (and mostly male) – alongside key 'local' celebrities including grime star Skepta and Olympian Mo Farah. At the time of writing, the advert has been viewed almost three million times in the five days since its release, including being shared by London's Mayor Sadiq Khan. Acclaimed as a celebration of diversity, it has also attracted criticism for its erasure of (South) Asians who represent a significant part of London's population – but not in this three-minute film. One widely circulated tweet says:

So @NikeUK doesn't feel the need to include Asians in their 'diverse' video on London?

Nike are happy for Pakistanis to stitch their footballs and for factories in Bangladesh to make their clothes. But we aren't marketable enough to be in this commercial?

Disgraceful exclusion.

Arguably the advert might be accused of replaying the established stereotypes of race and sexuality discussed above, whilst also buying (into) particular forms of contemporary black male urban cool.

A third broad area of transformation can be seen in constructions of sexuality, and the growing visibility of gay men in consumer culture. Soap brand Lush broke the mould with their 2017 Valentine's Day advert, showing two men smiling and embracing in a bath tub. Today, advertisers from clothing stores to banks and building societies increasingly show LGB models, and other highly visible sites such as dating shows are almost as likely to feature male same-sex couples as heterosexual ones.

Masculinity itself is also troubled by a growing number of adverts using transgender models, and an increasing trend to androgynous or gender-fluid looks – reflecting a moment in which almost half (49%) of young people (18–24-year-olds) in the UK see themselves as 'not heterosexual' (YouGov 2015) and as existing somewhere on a continuum of both sexuality and gender. Underscoring this, James Charles was hired the following year to be Cover Girl's first male model. The opportunity to sell make-up to men as well as women represents a huge aspiration for cosmetics companies and is already implicated in dramatic transformations in images of some men, alongside broader social trends.

Finally, advertising companies are increasingly adapting for men two well-worn techniques that have long been targeted at women: the focus on breaking the rules, and on building body confidence (see Gill and Elias 2014; Gill and Orgad 2015). H&M's 2015 advert 'Close the loop' starts with the instructions to 'wear brown shoes after six', 'wear a short skirt after 40, wear a short skirt if you're a man' and goes on to exhort men to 'stand up', 'wear pink', 'look fake, look chic, look sheikh' – with accompanying images that include men in Sikh turbans, a disabled man with prosthetic legs and a man dressed in traditional Emirati style. The advert concludes with the following slogan: 'There are no rules in fashion, but one: recycle your clothes'. A similarly toned 'be whoever you want to be' ethic structures Axe's 2016 commercial 'Find your magic'. The company launched it thus: 'who needs a six pack when you have your own thing? No must-have, must-be fashion norms or body standards. The most attractive man you can be is yourself. So find what makes you you. Then work on it'. A kaleidoscope of images of masculinity is shown, each valued for their look or moves or touch. Breaking the rules here means breaking with accepted definitions of masculinity, in favour of a more individual style – perhaps suited to our individualistic, neoliberal times.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have documented a shift in representations of the male body in mainstream visual culture, and have looked back to the earlier generation of writing that tried to make sense of how ‘objectifying’ images of men were designed – through their composition and mise en scène – to disavow homoeroticism as well as to hold on to patriarchal power. Charting a shift over the last three decades, I have asked whether those same strategies (e.g. particular postures, organisation of gazes, presence of a woman, etc.) are still in place, and, in particular, whether advertising campaigns from recent years represent a rupture with previous modes of representation.

I have suggested that the advertising images of David Beckham and David Gandy (for Armani, and Dolce & Gabbana, respectively) did indeed represent a shift in mainstream depictions of the male body, with their focus on the male groin, offering a clear outline of the penis and balls, at the very centre of the images. Whether this, in turn, constitutes a break in relation to the power of heteronormativity and male power is less clear. It seems to me that the images may simultaneously *challenge and reproduce* patriarchal power and the normative force of heterosexuality. The existing terms of reference provided in the groundbreaking work of Dyer and Neale are useful, to be sure, but they can no longer (if they ever could) offer us definitive readings of such representations, for their meaning depends in part upon the volume of such representations, their intertextual relationships with other media (including the ways in which the ‘models’ are made to signify particular meanings, the ways in which such advertising campaigns are talked and written about in the media), and, above all, on an understanding of the history of such representations and their cultural significance.

As I have shown in this chapter, representations of men are changing rapidly right now, breaking what were previously understood as the rules of visual culture. The extent to which newer, more diverse, queer and sexually ambiguous images of men represent a challenge to unequal gender relations and heteronormativity, or are simply the latest in a series of adaptations designed to hold on to power, remains a contested issue. In the wake of #MeToo and #TimesUp we see contradictory trends: on the one hand calls to equalise rather than eradicate sexual objectification: ‘keep the grid girls but up the ante with chaps in hot pants’, as one *London Evening Standard* headline put it (February 22nd, 2018). On the other, we hear growing numbers of accounts of men too who have been harassed and abused in image-based industries such as modelling. More broadly, articulations of the distress experienced by men who feel pressured by circulating images of ‘perfect’ masculinity are becoming a feature of the popular mediascape, with advertising campaigns increasingly moving in on the terrain of male body image and self-esteem, long the province of ‘love your body’ campaigns for women. As I write, London Fashion Week is being picketed by a small group of male demonstrators from #Fashionforeveryman, whose placards declare ‘95% of men don’t feel like the models used in fashion campaigns represent them’ and ‘one in five men admit to taking slimming pills or crash dieting as a result of the pressure to look “perfect”’. For anyone interested in changing depictions of gender and sexuality in media culture this represents an interesting and challenging time.



## Note

- 1 See my earlier work for a discussion of constructions of the figures of the new man and the new lad, which highlights the extent to which a range of cultural intermediaries are involved in not simply representing new masculinities through such figures, but quite literally constructing and materialising them.

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# 4

## USING PHOTOGRAPHS TO EXPLORE THE EMBODIMENT OF PLEASURE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

*Lilliana Del Busso*

This chapter explores examples from two empirical studies of young women's embodied experiences in everyday life. As opposed to generating talk about embodied experience through a traditional qualitative interview, the studies explored here used photographs as a way to tap into and ground accounts in specific and concrete experiences. As such, participants' explorations of their own pre-existing photographs and photographs produced in relation to the topic of research aided the focus on particular experiences, providing access to rich detail in relation to living through specific embodied events.

Furthermore, the research presented attempted to take account of the multiple modalities through which lived experience is constituted, such as the visual, touch, sound and language. In the current research, embodiment thus was considered beyond 'the body' inscribed by discourse, particularly by highlighting the felt and sensed spatial and temporal aspects of being-in-the-world.

Influenced by Cartesian dualism, privileging mind over body, the discipline of psychology has focused its attention on sites of specific psychological functionality (e.g. cognition); a practice which often abstracts 'the body' from social, relational and embodied psychological experience (Stam 1998). As such, people's embodied existence in the social, relational and material world has rarely been the starting point for investigating psychological phenomena. Hence, although 'the body' has an implied presence in psychology, mainly as a vehicle for the production of thought, 'the body' or embodied experience has rarely been theorised explicitly in relation to specific areas of concern to psychological study. In contrast, explicit and focused theorisation of 'the body' has been far more forthcoming within the disciplines of sociology (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner 1991; Welton 1998;

Williams and Bendelow 1998; Weiss and Haber 1999; Fraser and Greco 2005; Howson 2005), anthropology (Csordas 1999) and feminist studies (Harraway 1990; Grosz 1994; Davis 1997; Ussher 1997; Price and Shildrick 1999; Young 2005). Nevertheless, albeit a greater interest in 'the body' for itself, all these fields can be characterised as having been heavily influenced by and privileging a post-structuralism of 'the body'. For example, it can be argued that both the present/absent 'body' in psychology and the abstracted, inscribed 'body' of post-structuralism suffer from severe reductionism, as suggested by Stam (1998: 5):

Whereas psychology splits and compartmentalizes the body into functions that deny the embodied nature of psychological life and experience, so can an individualistic language of 'bodies in discourse' deny the crucial manner in which the body is already and always social in its expressions and impressions

As suggested by Stam, these conceptualisations and treatments of 'the body' fall short of taking account of the 'embodied nature of psychological life and experience', thus neglecting the sensuous, spatial and relational aspects of being-in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty 1962).

### **'The body' and embodied experience**

The dominance of a post-structuralist focus reluctant to acknowledge materiality and lived experience has often produced an abstracted 'body' far removed from people's everyday lives. In relation to the post-structuralist language of 'the body', which dominates most social science disciplines, Csordas (1999) has suggested that in the literal world of the social sciences 'the body' is often far abstracted from the lived experiences and material realities of people's lives. In line with these ideas, Price and Shildrick argue that lived embodiment has been neglected and what has transpired in the literature is an 'emptied out body-without-organs leaving only an undifferentiated surface of inscription' (1999: 7). Although post-structuralist analyses have been invaluable in terms of understanding power dynamics in relation to social categories such as, for example, gender, sexuality and ethnicity, it can be argued that such analyses, particularly in relation to embodiment, are limited by an overreliance on discourse.

More recently, however, researchers have become interested in exploring the sensory and felt experiences of being embodied (Pink 2011; Allen-Collinson and Owton 2015; Cromby 2015; Hunter and Emerald 2016). Within this context, the use of phenomenological approaches has allowed explorations of lived experience as sensory and spatial, emphasising the continuous engagement and reciprocity between person and world. Embodied existence is thus understood as being-in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty 1962), where world and person ('self') are inseparable and simultaneously produced in continuous process. In line with phenomenological principles, embodiment can be articulated as a process of sensuous and embodied being in and living through a relational, spatial, material and socio-political world. As opposed to the static, discursively inscribed body, embodiment is the person's

process of continuous motion oriented through a world of spaces, objects and others (Ahmed 2006). As described by Denzin, embodied experience is a process of living through time and space:

The lived body is a temporalized spatial structure. That is, the person's spatial movements, locations, and relocations can be understood only as movements within time ... The body does not fill up space in the same way that other real, physical things do or a piece of equipment does. The person takes space in and determines her own locations, making room for herself as she moves about and draws things near.

(2007: 58)

Hence, persons, as described by Denzin here, are in continuous interaction and negotiation with their spatial limitations and possibilities, not as body-objects but as persons in motion who orient around and engage with multiple spaces and objects. Whereas traditional phenomenological approaches can be critiqued for 'naively' accepting first-person descriptions of lived experience, hermeneutic phenomenological approaches seek to contextualise individual lived experiences in wider social structures and dynamics. In the context of such an analysis, descriptions of lived experience are read in terms of how they have been made sense of by the individual (e.g. embodied detail) as well as being subjected to an *interpretation* in relation to wider social and political dynamics (e.g. discursive dynamics, power). For example, Iris Marion Young's (2005) groundbreaking work *Throwing Like a Girl* draws simultaneously on the phenomenological and post-structuralist works of Merleau-Ponty and Foucault in exploring the terms of feminine embodiment in the world. In doing so Young uses case examples to illustrate ways in which women carry out physical tasks such as throwing a ball, arguing that women are encouraged to live through their physical existence in particular ways related to heteronormative contexts. For example, Young notes that, more often than not, women do not engage their full potential for movement, producing instead more passive states of embodiment. As such she asserts that women often experience restriction in relation to comportment, in terms of generally occupying space but more specifically engaging in motion, experiencing a sense of their bodies as object-like:

An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention.

(Young 2005: 45)

Hence, through Young's focus on embodied *experience* in the context of everyday settings and practices she is able to identify specific ways in which women's subjectivities are formed in relation to the restriction of embodied agency in heteronormative spaces. In summary, the framework outlined here offers

understandings of embodiment which simultaneously take account of the rich detail and structure of experience as ‘lived and felt in the flesh’ (Young 2005: 7), and the socio-political context and power dynamics through which such experience is lived.

In line with attempts to address embodiment in terms of the sensuous and spatial, Brown, Cromby, Harper, Johnson and Reavey (2009) suggest there has been a ‘turn to experience across the social sciences’, specifically aiming to address and move beyond discourse reductionism (Bigwood 1991; Marshall 1999; Williams and Bendelow 1998; Langdridge 2003). In particular, empirical researchers have attempted to develop methodologies which take into account the multi-modal nature of lived experience (e.g. discourse, vision, touch), and aim to produce accounts of specific and contextualised embodiment which gives rich detail in relation to what it’s like to live through specific experiences (e.g. bodily and spatial detail of an experience) (Gillies et al. 2004, 2005).

Building on this work the following sections suggest ways in which pre-existing photographs and photo-production methods are suited for and can be utilised in the context of the theoretical and methodological framework presented here for exploring embodiment.

### **Exploring embodied experience through photographic images**

The focus on ‘what the eye can see’ is partly a movement against what some might see as the extraordinary dominance of talk and text in our research imaginations and methods, extraordinary because of the one dimensional nature of this foray into, or construction of, what most would agree is a multi-dimensional, multi-sensory ‘reality’.

*(Mason 2002: 104)*

As suggested by Mason, a research engagement with ‘a multi-dimensional, multi-sensory “reality”’ requires methods which incorporate but also attempt to go beyond discourse or ‘text’ (e.g. ‘the body’ as text) and take account of, for instance, the visual modality through which the world is experienced. The traditional semi-structured research interview, utilised mainly in relation to discursive, conversational or thematic analyses, more often than not produces talk *about* a specific topic (object of the text). Introducing the use of photographs, in contrast, offers ways of *tapping into* and *grounding* participants’ accounts in remembered experiences, time and space/place. Rose (2007: 238) suggests that utilising photographs in social science research is of particular use in relation to evoking ‘information, affect and reflection’. Hence, visual materials such as photographs can generate rich description in relation to specific and concrete experiences through an image by allowing participants to tap into or access remembered detail of ‘what an experience was like’ (sensuous, emotional, spatial and relational) (Bates, McCann, Kaye, and Taylor 2017; Papaloukas, Quincey, and Williamson 2017). In the process of exploring their photographs the participants’ focus is shifted away from ‘what they think about’ a particular embodied experience and on to the details of what the experience was like when they were living through it. Hence, a photographic image can prompt detailed description in relation to being-in-

the-material-world of places, objects and others, emphasising being as motion-through-space as opposed to reproducing a static (discursively inscribed) 'body'. Both pre-existing photographs and photographs produced for the research can highlight temporal aspects of lived experience, for example in terms of different life 'stages', or in exploring everyday life (e.g. times of day/embodied practices).

In studies where participants' pre-existing photographs are used, images are often selected in adherence to the researcher's instructions and in relation to the research topic, enabling particular accounts and perhaps silencing others. Participants thus reflect on and make choices in relation to the selection of photographs and the narratives made possible/impossible by their images prior to the interview. It can be argued that this approach, nevertheless, is particularly suited for exploring issues of change, process and life stage. In contrast, photographs produced by participants for the research offer a more *active* approach, in terms of engaging with material and social contexts, reflecting on the selection of images to be taken and the accounts made possible from the photographic production (Radley and Taylor 2003; Frith and Harcourt 2007). The photo-production method thus requires participants to communicate their lived experience through images as well as speech, producing contextualised accounts involving material and relational realms of space/place, objects and others. In the context of both methods, however, the participants are afforded the opportunity to explore and interpret their own images, showing the researcher what their experience 'is like', in the context of a research interview.

The following sections of this chapter explore two examples of using photographs in the context of two empirical studies. The first study used pre-existing photographs in exploring women's embodied experiences at different life stages and over time, whereas the second study used photo-production in exploring women's current experiences of embodying pleasure in everyday life. Hence, in the first study, women's own pre-existing photographs from different time periods in their lives were utilised alongside life history interviewing in order to aid the exploration of particular experiences and events of relevance to everyday embodiment over time. In the second study, of heterosexual women's experiences of embodying pleasure, the women who participated produced a set of photographs representing the material and social contexts of their embodied experiences alongside a daily diary of their experiences. The participating women took a number of photographs of objects, spaces, places and other people they considered as being of importance to their experience of being embodied in everyday life, and specifically in relation to their embodiment of pleasure. In both studies women reflected on and interpreted their own images in the context of an interview.

### **The use of pre-existing photographs: remembering the embodiment of time and place**

The purpose of the study was to allow women to identify and explore a number of specific experiences across life stages which had contributed to their overall sense of being embodied. The research thus asked which everyday experiences were central and significant to women's experience of being embodied over time.

### *Picturing embodiment*

Eight young women took part in a topical life history interview, in which they were invited to talk about everyday experiences and events that they thought were particularly relevant to the ways in which they have experienced their embodiment (Plummer, 2001). One of the aims of conducting life history interviews was to allow women to identify and talk in detail about specific experiences which they considered to be important to their overall experience of being embodied. Furthermore, women's own pre-existing photographs were used as a visual aid in encouraging the remembering of specific events taking place during the time period depicted in the photograph (e.g. adolescence). Hence, the participating women were asked to bring along pre-existing photographs of themselves to the interview, which they felt were relevant to the research topic. At the start of the interviews they were asked to arrange the photographs on a table in full view of themselves and the researcher, and describe each one to the researcher in terms of the content depicted and its relation to their embodied experiences over time (Radley and Taylor 2003). The aim was to ground, and in turn access, *specific* memories of embodied experiences during the time periods represented in the photographs.

For example, Lucy, a 26-year-old heterosexual woman, brought along to the interview a photograph of herself in her early 20s, taken just after she had swum through a rock cave to the interview, and in describing the photograph she said:

it's not a very flattering angle and it's all kind of thighs and chin and nothing particularly attractive but I actually really like it because ( ) there's no make up, there's no hair, there's not a huge amount of clothing um, and although it isn't flattering I really like it, I like it because it's, it's me ( ) what you were saying about how you think about your body, it's like the most perfect example in here of what your body can do, I could climb a cliff, I could dive into the sea, I could swim, I could go through the rocks, I could climb back again and it just felt really, it was freezing so that was part of it. When you're like that was energizing, because it was a very stimulating day and I do realise I like it [the photo] for the memories rather than because I like how I look in it

Lucy uses her photograph here to describe her experience of being physically capable. She emphasises how she has engaged in active aspects such as climbing, diving and swimming. In the interview Lucy went on to recount a number of experiences of movement which allowed her to experience herself as 'tomboy' and 'athletic', and contrasted these with a felt social expectation of more passive femininity. For example, in her heterosexual relationships she had often felt that she was expected to dress and show off the part of her body favoured by her partner (e.g. breasts, legs) in order to appear adequately feminine and 'heterosexy'. In contrast to a felt sense of ownership of herself in her sexual relationships, she stated that being able to swim through the rock cave had made her 'feel very powerful' and suggested that physical capability through movement allowed her a felt sense of empowerment which was more important to her than how she looked during the experience. Lucy



contrasted her experiences of being physically capable and 'active' with experiences in which she had 'performed' femininity, constructed by Lucy as 'passive', disempowered and something that 'other' women engaged in more frequently than herself. As argued by feminists, the production of women as feminine 'ornamented surface' (Bartky 1993: 455) relies on a performance of a groomed and relatively static body-object (Young 2005; Choi 2006). This production of femininity, however, can be and is disrupted by women's engagement in movement, which often results in a dishevelled and untidy appearance, for example through sweating and other physiological processes (Choi 2006).

In the interview the photograph of Lucy on top of the rock enabled her to produce a narrative in which her embodiment was characterised by physical movement and capability. The photograph was particularly meaningful in relation to Lucy's experience of and ambivalence towards social expectations of embodying (static) femininity. Although the image showed Lucy in full figure wearing a bathing suit, her analysis of the photo centred on the remembered experience of swimming through the rock cave. She stated that the importance of the image to her embodied experience over time was not how she *looked* in the photo, but rather what she could *do*: 'I could climb a cliff, I could dive into the sea, I could swim, I could go through the rocks, I could climb back'. In the interview Lucy utilised the photograph to evidence her *experience* of being in motion, intentionally manoeuvring through a difficult landscape (Chisholm 2008), and, importantly, focused away from *looking at herself* (as body-object in the photo).

The photograph enabled Lucy to tap into the remembered experience of being at the rock cave and explore the bodily sensations of importance in experiencing the event. In addition to providing rich detail of this particular experience, in the life history context the photograph encouraged the remembering of similar, as well as contradictory, experiences (e.g. of being physically capable, in motion) over the life span. As illustrated by Lucy's example in the current study, the utilisation of pre-existing photographs not only allowed descriptions of the 'surface' aspects of the image (e.g. myself as the body in the image), but enabled the exploration of specific experiences in rich detail, emphasising being in motion and engaging in actions in the material and spatial world.

### **Participant photo-production: experiencing pleasure in space**

The purpose of the study presented in this section was to allow heterosexual women to identify and explore in detail everyday experiences of embodying pleasure. The research thus asked which experiences women identify as pleasurable and how these were lived through in women's immediate spatial, material and relational everyday contexts. Women thus recorded descriptions of their experiences of pleasure in a daily diary, and produced a set of photographs in relation to their everyday social and material contexts.

Hence, the seven heterosexual women who took part each received a pack with a disposable camera and a notebook for diary-writing. The women were instructed to write a daily diary of their experiences of embodying pleasure over

### *Picturing embodiment*

a period of two weeks, and to produce a set of photographs of spaces, places, objects and people which they thought related to their experiences of everyday embodiment and pleasure. In producing their accounts, the women were encouraged to reflect on specific experiences of embodying pleasure in relation to touch, taste, sight and smell. Having produced their diary accounts and photographs, the women each took part in an interview, allowing them to discuss their experiences of embodying pleasure and to reflect on their experience of producing the diaries and photos. The interviews were an important part of the data collection process and provided the participants with a space for self-reflection and interpretation of their own data. As in the previous study, the photographs were arranged by the participant on a table in front of herself and the researcher. In all the interviews the participants used the photographs continuously in exploring their experiences.

One of the main aspects through which women reported experiencing pleasure in their diaries, photos and interviews was moving through outside spaces. For example, Ann, a 29-year-old Irish woman, took a photograph of the woods (Figure 4.1) and used it to describe how only particular outside spaces allowed her experiences of embodying pleasure in her everyday life:

It's like I've said in there [diary] a lot of the time when I'm walking around thinking about what I'm going to be teaching or what I am writing or anything like that it feels as if my consciousness is sort of not even in my body but sort of off a little bit to the side or that I'm sort of out of myself, but



*Figure 4.1* Ann's photograph of the woods.

walking through the woods it's like the awareness sort of sinks down in me rather than all just being focused in my head it sort of moves down through my body and I'm aware of my legs and my feet moving and almost like a point of connection between me and the ground ... [the woods] it's almost like a place of worship in a way ... connects me with my body

In the extract Ann described her experience of embodying pleasure as characterised by her felt movement through the outside space of the woods. In particular, she emphasised a sense of her 'awareness' moving through herself and connecting her feet to the ground she was walking on. This was reminiscent of other experiences of embodying pleasure through movement described by Ann as a felt sense of her awareness becoming embodied: 'a feeling of all the parts of me kind of being melted together into a whole instead ... it's just a sensation that I can move forward because I'm working as one'. These experiences contrasted with a felt sense of herself as fragmented brain/body/parts, described by Ann as a more common way of experiencing her embodiment.

In the interview, Ann used the photo of the woods to describe her felt experience of the woods as a unique space in which experiencing herself 'as one' was made possible. Although the daily movement of walking can be characterised as an ordinary routine experience for able-bodied people, many of the women in the current study suggested that their experiences of walking became 'special' in particular outside spaces (Rose 1999).

It can be argued that photo-production methods allow participants an active position within the research process (Guillemin and Drew 2010). This is not only achieved through their ability to move around in the immediate surroundings of their everyday lives, capturing aspects of lived materiality in terms of the spatial world, but also through setting the agenda by identifying aspects of particular relevance to their experience of the research topic.

As illustrated by Ann's example, the participant-produced photographs emphasised young women's experiences of being in and moving through particular spaces. Essentially, the photographs enabled rich descriptions of embodied experiences of spatiality, and allowed participants to *show* the researcher what being in space is like.

### **Reflections on the use of photographs in capturing embodied experience**

Contextualised within the post-structuralist phenomenological framework proposed here, it can be argued that the exploration of pre-existing photographs and participant-produced photographs allows accounts which *tap into* and are *grounded in* lived experience (time/space/process). In contrast to asking participants to *talk about* embodiment in the traditional qualitative interview, introducing photographs into embodiment research thus has the capacity to disrupt narrative rehearsal and produce more complex accounts of lived experience (Reavey and Johnson 2008).

In the first study presented here the use of photographs was beneficial in terms of aiding the remembering of a life stage (e.g. childhood), particularly the felt and

sensed experience of living through the period of time in question, and the identification of particular experiences of significance in relation to embodiment. Women were thus prompted by the researcher to use the photograph as an aid to tap into the felt experience of being at the specific life stage, and to identify specific experiences of relevance to their embodiment as made sense of over time. One of the challenges of using pre-existing photographs of women themselves in the context of embodiment research, however, is that participants are looking at themselves in the photograph and may focus on their body (as object in the image) as opposed to the felt and sensed experience of being embodied. It was thus important for the researcher to continuously prompt women to identify and describe particular experiences taking place during the time period illustrated in the photograph. In contrast, participants in the second study explored their lived experiences in terms of the spatial, material and relational contexts in which they live through their embodiment, recording spaces/places, objects and others. This approach was particularly successful in terms of highlighting the spatial and temporal aspects of embodiment, encouraging explorations of what it's like to be in the (socio-political) world. As such, in this study women were less concerned with their appearance and their body (object) as 'for-others' and more concerned with how they *experienced* pleasure in their everyday contexts.

In the two studies presented here women's photographs were produced with the help of a traditional or a disposable camera, and printed on photographic paper. More recently, the development of mobile phone camera technology and widespread use of social media platforms have resulted in photographs becoming a common way to construct and communicate lived experience to others. Photographs of the food one is about to eat in a restaurant, the sky outside one's window or 'selfies' of the face and body are examples of common photographic images taken with a mobile phone camera and posted on personal profiles on social media platforms (Tiidenberg and Cruz 2015). This is a widespread practice and to many people the production and presentation of photographic images are familiar and common ways of communicating one's personal and embodied experience to others, and as such the use of photographs as a qualitative research method allows participant agency in line with feminist ethics of sharing power and direction in the research process. Furthermore, the use of pre-existing photographs can allow participants to select images in relation to the research topic and thus to produce narratives of experience focused on issues central to the participant. Photo-production methods offer participants an active position within the research, as the producer of images for interpretation, and to some extent enables the participant to pursue their own agenda through the selection of images to be taken and issues to be considered in relation to the topic of research (Reavey and Johnson 2008). In addition, in both studies presented here the photographs were analysed in terms of women's own reflections and interpretations of their images and formed part of their overall narratives, as opposed to being subject to an independent analysis by the researcher.

On the other hand, the researcher's use of participants' images in publication may present specific power dynamics and dilemmas in relation to the participants' ownership of the image and the research agenda. For example, embodiment research

can be considered a *sensitive* research topic (Renzetti and Lee 1993) and pre-existing photographs in particular may hold sensitive and highly personal significance for the individual participant. In the research presented here participants' pre-existing photographs were considered their personal property, and thus unsuitable for publication, whereas photographs produced for the research have been appropriately anonymised and presented publicly. In both studies importance was placed on participants' descriptions, meaning making and interpretations of what was represented in their own photos, rather than the presentation of photos to the research audience.

### Concluding comments

This chapter has explored the use of pre-existing photographs and photo-production in research on young women's embodied experiences in everyday life. As opposed to the traditional interview, which more often than not produces talk *about* 'the body', as abstracted and inscribed surface, the use of photographs offers an *experientially grounded* approach to exploring embodied experience. It can be argued that the use of visual methods is particularly fruitful for analyses which seek to understand lived experience as multi-modal and multi-sensory, and thus located in and lived through space/time. As illustrated by the examples explored here, the use of photographs enabled rich descriptions of women's experience as lived through spatial and material contexts. Some of the ethical dilemmas inherent to this approach, however, emerge in relation to the researcher's use of the photographs, for example in relation to published material, and the treatment of participants' own interpretations of their images and experiences. In the research presented here, photographs produced by participants for the research were considered suitable for publication. In relation to the utilisation of pre-existing photographs, however, what participants said about their photographs was privileged over the use of their photographs in published materials, ensuring participant anonymity and ownership of personal photographs.

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## 5

# NARRATING BIOGRAPHICAL DISRUPTION AND REPAIR

Exploring the place of absent images in  
women's experiences of cancer and  
chemotherapy

*Hannah Frith*

Pictures of our first day at school, a special birthday, holidays, weddings, friends and new additions to the family; photograph albums capture particular moments in a life. In providing opportunities for storytelling, generating laughter over outdated fashions or changing hair-styles and allowing the rehearsal and creation of family histories, photographs are also a site for constructing a sense of the past and creating a bridge between the past, present and future. Photograph albums offer a means for narrating the lives of ourselves and of others (Van House et al., 2004; Brookfield et al., 2008) and for charting biographical continuity. In contrast, an illness, such as cancer, can provoke a sense of 'biographical disruption' – a critical break between past (before the illness), present and future lives (Bury, 1982). The diagnosis of an illness, and in particular cancer, forces people to experience many changes in their lives, including the reality of an uncertain future, threats to identity and sense of self and a re-evaluation of the person's place in the world (Frank, 1995). As such, the stories that cancer patients tell about themselves as they negotiate their way through diagnoses, treatment regimens, changed bodies and disrupted identities are not just a way of making sense of an illness, but also a life (Mathieson and Stam, 1995). Narratives and storytelling are a medium through which people can make sense of, organise and draw together fragments of their lives into a cohesive whole, and are characterised by a temporal ordering of events (Hydén, 1997). Narratives are considered an invaluable source of experiential knowledge, a resource for developing empathy and patient-centred care, and an important conduit for aiding coping among patients (Frank, 1995; Charmez, 1999; Greenhalgh and Hurwitz, 1999).



Drawing on a photographic study of women's experiences of chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer, I consider the ways in which asking women to visually represent their lives engages them in the task of creating memories and doing 'biographical work' to establish the place of their illness within their identities and life worlds. Asking women to mark out particular moments as significant invites them to enact a bittersweet experience of creating memories that they might rather forget (a cancer diagnosis can be traumatic, and chemotherapy treatment unpleasant), while documenting a move towards recovery and a re-integration of the self into 'normal' activities (Radley and Taylor, 2003a). Re-viewing these images and using them to narrativise their experiences during an interview calls on women to remember past events and to confront images of past selves. Against this backdrop, this chapter explores the work that women do to re-image 'missing' photographs, and explores the role of absent images in creating boundaries around what selves are available to be remembered. In other words, I examine how the materiality of photographs is implicated in the biographical work done by women undergoing chemotherapy treatment for cancer as they narrate their experiences. But first, I will briefly describe the study from which the data are drawn.

### **The study**

Nineteen women (aged 35–68) who underwent adjuvant chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer volunteered to take part in a photographic study exploring their experiences of having an altered appearance. For all but one, this was their first experience of chemotherapy; 12 had undergone a mastectomy, and of the remaining seven several were expecting surgery at a later date. An altered appearance, particularly hair loss, is one of the most feared aspects of chemotherapy (Batchelor, 2001; Frith et al., 2007) and provokes a threat to identity as one is visually identifiable as a person-with-cancer and no longer looks like one's 'usual self' (Harcourt and Frith, 2008).

Although using photographs and other visual methods alongside interviews is growing in popularity among researchers of health and illness experiences (see, for example, Rich et al., 2002; Radley and Taylor, 2003a; Guillernin, 2004), it is still relatively unusual. We opted for photographs in this study because we wanted to use a visual method that would be familiar to participants and forms part of people's usual storytelling practice. We also wanted something that would require little skill and expertise, and which would be easy for participants to engage with as and when they felt well enough or inspired to do so.

The women were initially interviewed about their expectations and concerns about how the treatment would impact on their appearance (see Frith and Harcourt, 2007 for an overview of the initial interviews). Next, with the aid of a disposable camera, they were asked to represent their experiences, thoughts and feelings about their changed appearance over the course of their treatment. As the temporal aspect of illness narratives is important, and because chemotherapy typically takes place over several months, we felt that photography would be a useful way of capturing the unfolding of their experience over time without

constant intrusion from the researchers. The women were invited to take as many or as few photographs as they wanted (the 15 participants who returned their cameras produced an average of 17.6 photographs each).

Given our focus on appearance it seemed appropriate to use a visual method, but because we anticipated that women might find this problematic we emphasised that they did not have to include photographs of themselves or use the cameras to document actual changes to their appearance, but could instead include pictures that represented their experiences of chemotherapy without actually showing these changes. We wanted women to have control over images of themselves and how they would be represented (see Frith and Harcourt, 2007 for further discussion about the benefits of using photography in this kind of research).

The photographs formed the basis for a second interview which took place at the end of their treatment; all interviews were conducted by myself or Diana Harcourt, with whom the research was conducted (for further details of the method see Frith and Harcourt, 2007).<sup>1</sup> The women were asked to speak to each of the photographs they had taken in turn, to describe it, talk about why they had taken it and to explain how it reflected their experience of having an altered appearance. As the photographs were taken in chronological order and because we adopted a relatively unstructured approach, the interviews were designed to evoke a narrative about the chemotherapy experiences as well as specific stories about events within this narrative.<sup>2</sup> As such, the photographs were not analysed in and of themselves, rather they were used in the interviews as a focus for narratives and stories about the chemotherapy experience.

In addition, the women were asked to reflect on the process of creating a photographic record of their experiences, what they planned to do with the photographs, which images they thought were particularly important and whether there were any images missing from their collection.<sup>3</sup> The interview transcripts were then inductively analysed to identify common themes or elements which run across the stories (Polkinghorne, 1995). As the focus of this chapter is on the ways in which photographs are implicated in the biographical work undertaken by women experiencing chemotherapy treatment, the data presented here are drawn primarily from the second interviews.

Using photographs produced by research participants alongside interviews is typically referred to as *photo-elicitation* (Harper, 2002; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Epstein et al., 2006), but this term has been problematised since it suggests that the image already exists and is simply elicited or extracted from the participant. This both obscures the work that goes into choosing what to photograph and into creating the visual image (Radley and Taylor, 2003b), and implies that photographs can draw out pre-stored and otherwise fixed memories (Pink, 2001). Following Hodgetts et al. (2007), we prefer the term *photo-production* since this encompasses a focus on the labour of assembling the images and attention to the context and circumstances of their fabrication, as well as on the pictures themselves. Photo-production allows for an exploration of the myriad ways that women approach the task of representing their lives, the practical and emotional difficulties they face in

attempting to visualise their experiences and the embodied experience of using the camera in a particular space and time. This is important as it can illuminate some of the ways in which storytelling can be facilitated or hindered with the use of photography and can reveal more about the context in which narratives have been generated.

Moreover, the shift from elicitation to production also reflects a move in understanding the relationship between photographs and memories. Rather than acting as triggers for preexisting, relatively fixed memories which are internally held, we understand photographs to have an important role in constructing memories and a sense of the past (Sontag, 1977; Radley, 1990; Edwards, 1999). We are not concerned here with the mechanics of memory and whether photographs can facilitate remembering or even create false remembering. Rather, we are interested in the ways in which talk about the photographs is constructed by participants as acts of remembering and forgetting, and we explore how this is implicated in the work of 'biographical repair' following ill-health. Talking about photographs is a form of 'social remembering' (Brookfield et al., 2008).

This constructionist approach treats 'remembering' (and forgetting) as a social and communicative practice. Here, recollection is 'not a neutral activity, involving the recall of stored information, but rather a social act in itself through which the past is invoked in relevant, meaningful ways in the course of some activity in the present' (Brookfield et al., 2008: 479). It is these two strands – exploring the processes of photo-production/non-production and the construction of remembering and forgetting – which we discuss in relation to absent images.

### Creating memories

[I] started to realise that my hair was starting to grow back and that I thought I'll take a photograph of that because it's a really important thing to remember.

*(Jane)<sup>4</sup>*

certain things were planned – like when I knew they were having their heads shaved – I thought that would be a good thing to take, I'll take my camera.

*(Georgia)*

As these quotes illustrate, the act of taking a photograph imparts social significance to the moment (Sontag, 1977), and is constructed as a way of 'making memories'. It is precisely this feature of photographs which researchers exploit and which makes participant-led photography a valuable research tool. People take photographs to capture moments in their lives, and to preserve on film significant memories which might otherwise be forgotten (Walker and Moulton, 1989). Many of the images taken by the women in this study were designed to capture a particular event or allow for the telling of a particular story. These stories involved a chronological representation of the chemotherapy journey, and were

poignant, vivid and relayed with tears and laughter. Like many stories, they had distinct beginnings, middles and ends, and included milestones (e.g. losing hair, wearing a wig, hair re-growth and last treatment) that took place over several months. These stories charted the journey through biographical disruption and repair as this was written on to the bodies of these women. Several women took photographs of themselves before their treatment in order to capture and retain an image of their 'normal' selves: 'That was just the start, before I'd lost my hair ... it reminded me of how I should have looked' (Barbara). During their chemotherapy treatment not only did they feel ill and debilitated, they also looked different and not like their normal selves: 'you look like something out of a concentration camp' (Caroline) or 'something out of *Star Trek*' (Louise).

Towards the end of treatment hair re-growth was seen as marking a shift back to normality, as Anne observed, 'it's only now, now I've got a head of hair, I mean it's very, very short, but now I'm beginning to feel that I'm getting back towards being me again'. For the women themselves, and for those around them, hair re-growth was welcomed as a sign of recovery. For example, Caroline notes how for her young children hair loss was 'symbolic of my illness and then the hair growing back for them was a sign for them of me getting better'.

However, hair re-growth does not necessarily signal a return to the pre-chemotherapy self as hair can grow back a different colour, texture or waviness. Georgia who had had very long hair, couldn't get excited when her hair grew back 'short and spikey' because she kept thinking 'even this time next year when we've got another Christmas, my hair is still not going to be back to how I had it'. In contrast Julia, whose hair had grown back grey and very short at the time of the interview, said 'I quite like the colour' and 'if it stays like this I won't dye it, I'd rather leave it like it'.

For some, getting their appearance back to exactly how it was before chemotherapy was seen as the only way to repair the biographical disruption precipitated by the treatment, for others their changed appearance was re-integrated into their sense of self. The photographs were used to explore the continuities and changes between past and present selves, in charting the shifts through biographical disruption and repair. What, then, of photographs which go missing from the collection or which were never taken?

'Missing' photographs can take different pathways from presence to absence – some are carefully planned but never taken, others are taken but then lost and some are neither planned nor taken yet their non-appearance is still noticeable. Despite their material absence, missing images can evoke discussions as vivid, engaging and detailed as those stirred up by those photographs which can be handled, stored, stroked and examined during the interview (see Hodgetts et al., 2007; Lassetter et al., 2007). Exploring why these images didn't make it into film is important. While photographs are sometimes 'missing' because practical constraints limit the kinds of images which can be produced, others are purposively absent – both tell us something about the nature of the life tasks (and research tasks) in which participants are engaged.

Practically, these women found that they sometimes forgot to take the camera with them when they needed it, or that they simply missed the moment to capture an image (see also Klitzing's (2004) account of the experiences of homeless women). Lucy described how she missed the opportunity to photograph the 'big boils on my neck' which she developed after taking steroids. By the time she visited the doctor they had 'already started to go down' and she thought, 'oh well next time I'll take a picture when they're nice and big, but they never came again'. Lucy had not spoken about these boils, or about her skin (which she described as being usually a bit spotty but had been exceptionally clear once the boils disappeared), up until the point when we asked about the missing photographs. Nonetheless, this was a worrying and embarrassing side-effect of her treatment which influenced her appearance and which she felt was an important part of her biographical journey through chemotherapy.

'Missing' images are also sometimes carefully planned, imagined and envisioned, and considerable creative thought invested in ways of representing the sensory nature of the illness experience. For example, Louise described how she planned photographs of 'manky old mince meat' that had gone all 'yellow and yukky', or to 'just walk into the supermarket and take pictures of the bleach section' to represent how she felt about the toxicity of the chemotherapy treatment and the way in which she felt it was harming her body at the same time as helping it to fight cancer. These women could provide vivid descriptions – or narrative pictures (cf. Hodgetts et al., 2007) – of the images they would like to have produced. Narrative picturing means that the images can be described and interrogated *as if* they were available. However, although these descriptions can stand in for the missing photographs, they cannot completely replace the images which include many details which would take too long to articulate, and a picture of rotting meat or pustular boils may more readily evoke visceral reactions (e.g. of disgust). But, by including a discussion of 'missing' photographs in the interviews, we were able to access elaborated accounts of experience. Perhaps the disruption of the photographic biography can, to some extent, be repaired by the use of narrative picturing.

Sometimes, however, narrative picturing is not enough. If photographs are seen as conduits or containers of memories, their absence can bring with it a sense of loss. When photographs which women remember taking are 'missing' (perhaps because they had failed to use the flash mechanism or because the images had not been processed), they open up a gap in the story. The material absence of a photograph is treated as if a significant moment has been lost, a memory forgotten or an opportunity to remember lost. Jane, for example, spoke about her distress at having to have a central line (a tube passed through a vein which ends up in the heart) inserted during her treatment. For her, this was extremely significant because it symbolised the seriousness of her illness. Consequently, the removal of the central line some months later was a great relief and represented a significant turning point in her recovery – one she was keen to include in her photographic record. Her disappointment when this photograph failed to materialise reflected the loss of the material image for aiding future re-tellings of her story.

### *Narrating biographical disruption*

Alex described warmly and with much amusement the time when her daughters 'had a bit of fun' shaving off her hair and playing around with different haircuts. She too, was disappointed that the photographs had not come out, and felt a sense of loss that this event was not available for re-viewing in the interview (and beyond).

Photographs are often treated as concrete records of events and occasions (Cronin, 1998), and are used to provide concrete evidence of the existence of a moment (Walker and Moulton, 1989). Many of these women were keen to have a permanent record of what was often a hugely significant period of their lives:

we take photographs to remind ourselves of things in our life and this is a hugely significant part of my life. I think it would be important to remember, to have these because I think I may want to look at them at different times in my life.

*(Jane)*

Similarly, Anne says that she 'may well keep them in an album' (as you might keep other family snapshots) and will 'never destroy them', so she can 'always just look back sometimes'. As important resources for biographical work, these photographs have a life beyond the project and are incorporated into the ongoing work of narrating their lives. However, it is the assumed permanence of photographs and their ability to bring events, activities and selves into existence which also explain why some images are deliberately never taken (which we return to later).

So, some images are carefully planned but never taken, others are taken but then lost and a sense of loss remains, and yet more are neither planned nor taken yet their non-appearance is still noticeable. It is to this last set of absences which we now turn. Some images were missing because at times these women simply felt too unwell to take pictures or were unwilling or unable to engage in the research process. We anticipated that participants would often feel fatigued or ill during their chemotherapy treatment, and that this might impact on their ability to engage in research tasks. Our choice of participant-led photography as a method was based on our desire to be as sensitive and unobtrusive as possible, and we emphasised that women could take as many or as few photographs as they wanted, and that they could decide when and where to take them. We hoped that participating would not be too demanding or burdensome. But, perhaps inevitably, women sometimes felt too ill or too demoralised to take photographs: 'I didn't take photographs of the most painful times, because it was sometimes too all-consuming' (Louise) and 'I was sometimes feeling so bad that sometimes I didn't have the energy and inclination to get the camera out' (Caroline). Understanding the constraints which limit photo-production and exploring the contexts and processes around 'missing' images can do more than simply 'fill in the gaps'. Missing photographs may also tell us something about the nature of the experience we are attempting to capture, and the boundaries which are placed around this experience. By asking about the context of photo-production, we gain an insight into how debilitating women found their treatment:

I hardly ever took [photographs] when I was feeling rough ... I knew I had to do it but I couldn't really be bothered with anything. Not really, apart from the usual routine.

(Linda)

This reminds us that photography is an embodied act (Ziller and Smith, 1977; Thoutenhoofd, 1998), and that the effort involved in creating and making photographs may be considerable (Crang, 1997). The idea that there are experiences which are too painful to represent, and too difficult to capture, is itself very telling. For example, the homeless respondents in one study failed to take some photographs because they couldn't access the necessary spaces, didn't have the time or resources to revisit areas or were concerned about being moved on by the police if they went to take pictures (Hodgetts et al., 2007). Exploring these absent images not only allows for narrative picturing to complete the stories, the telling of the process of photo-production (or in this case, non-production) in itself reveals something about the spatial constraints, monitoring and surveillance and the social exclusion under which these people live their lives. In this sense, the absences are as revealing as the photographs themselves.

In summary, the aim of remembering in the interviews was the re-presentation of experiences so that we might understand what these women went through and why it was important. Photographs as culturally understood ways of 'capturing memories' allow for the re-telling of a story about biographical disruption and repair (both in the content of the interview, and in the doing of the interview). Adopting a *photo-production* approach enables an exploration of 'missing' photographs which makes possible a process of narrative picturing to 'fill in the gaps' in the biographical story. Moreover, a focus on the context and circumstances of the making, or non-making, of images can inform understanding of the experience itself. However, the materiality of the pictures, being able to handle, store and revisit them on future occasions in order to reminisce, also meant that missing photographs were sometimes greeted with a sense of loss. The following section further explores the role of photographs in remembering and forgetting by exploring how, in creating a bridge between past, present and future, photographs facilitate the work of social remembering and enable the doing of biographical work around the shift from illness to recovery.

### **Engendering forgetting**

Reflecting on their study of remembering one's stay in hospital, Radley and Taylor (2003a) observe how re-viewing photographs during interviews 'disrupts the separation of then and now, of the hospital and home', and sets up a tension for one participant of 'having to remember what she was trying to forget' (p. 144). Recovery from illness and hospitalisation necessitates a distance from the experience; 'forgetting' allows this distance. In re-telling the story of one's stay in hospital, 'forgetting' some of the detail of this stay serves to signal this distance even as, in the re-telling, the experience is brought into the present to be re-lived. It is

this slip-sliding back and forth from past to present, and between remembering and forgetting, which creates opportunities and challenges for biographical work during the interviews. For these women undergoing chemotherapy, moving between the past and the present also meant shifting between the ill self and the healthy self, and creating a biographical story about the return to the normal self, or the adjustment to a forever changed self. It is in this context that we discuss the role of absent images in managing biographical work and rendering the ill self unavailable for the future.

If photographs are constructed as a way of ‘capturing the past’, re-examining and accounting for the photographs in the interview is an invitation for participants to ‘re-live’ their experiences, albeit through the lens of the present. Women noted that the pictures ‘bring[s] it more back’ (Alex) or ‘brought all those things back to me’ (Jane). As Anne said, ‘it took me back, and made me remember the good and the bad’. The feelings evoked by the photographs don’t only reside in the past, they are felt there and then in the interview. Photographs are ‘extraordinarily important, emotionally resonant objects’ (Rose, 2004: 549), and these emotions are mirrored in the ways the photographs are handled (passed over quickly, pushed away, turned face down) and in the looks of disgust and revulsion that accompany their viewing.

As Jane relayed, ‘I felt quite emotional when I looked at them, particularly seeing me without any hair’ because ‘I didn’t think I looked that bad’, or as Julia said, ‘I cried [when I looked back through the photos] because you forget don’t you [ ... ] they’re horrendous photographs, I mean I didn’t think I was the most attractive woman in the world but good grief. These women are shocked and distressed as they re-view the images both because their illness is written on their bodies and because they are re-living what it felt like to be ill. The biographical disruption is re-experienced in the interview when women revisit their illness, their changed appearance and the rupture of their sense of self:

I found that was probably the most harrowing photograph for me, I really, when I looked at that I thought ‘oh God’ you know. Yeah I think I look really ill in that photograph .... I think I look really awful it doesn’t look anything like me.

*(Jane)*

Although some of the photographs depicted positive images and were described with fondness, many served to remind women of their ill selves – selves which are transformed, different looking and debilitated. In their study of recovery from a hospital stay, Radley and Taylor (2003a) argue recovery from illness has as its aim the distancing of the hospital experience from the interview experience, and that photographs (and the memories they are constructed to contain) become resources for patients to present themselves as a ‘kind of patient’ who is now recovered from her hospital stay. In this study, the women drew on the photographs as resources for distancing themselves from the ill self. In talking about having ‘forgotten’ the ways in which the chemotherapy altered their appearance, or how ill they felt at



the time, women place themselves at a distance from the illness experience and position themselves as speaking from the present in which they are recovered:

going through them [the photographs] reminded me of feeling all those things, it's amazing how quickly you forget how you feel. Um, looking back on it now, and I think it's not really that long since I finished my chemotherapy and yet I feel amazingly so much better, I know I don't feel as well as I did beforehand, but I feel so much better [...] I couldn't bear the thought of going back to feeling like that again.

(Jane)

Garlick (2002) argues that the temporal nature of photographs, where events in the past are brought to bear on the present, is inextricably bound to the construction of self-identity. Photographs function to 'anchor ourselves within the past' (Harrison, 2002: 104) and connections between our present situation and the other spaces, places and times captured in the photographs allow for a construction of change or stability in our biographical narratives. In the example above, the separation of the self depicted in the past of the photographs from the present self speaking in the interview allows for a fracture between the ill self and the recovered self which presents illness as a thing of the past. So, if photographs can be used to do biographical work in constructing the separation of past from present, and ill self from recovered self, what is the work done by missing photographs?

If memories are made in the taking of a photograph, and if deciding what is 'photographable' marks it as significant and notable, then choosing not to create some images may serve to ensure forgetting or to deny the importance or existence of some experiences. Missing pictures may be absent *not* because they are considered 'not worth taking' but because they are *so* significant that to capture them on film would somehow make them more concrete and 'real'. For Louise it was difficult to 'admit that this really, really, sucks – you know, because I'm taking a photo of it', and she says that her 'coping mechanism' was 'edging away a little bit' by refusing to commit an image to film. Rather than *capturing* moments and events, Spence and Holland (1991) argue that photographs can be said to *create* moments, events and occasions. Because of their cultural associations with 'capturing reality', photographs are a way of bringing events into being. For Louise, taking a photograph of her worst experiences would make them more real, and would mean admitting the significance and emotional power of the event.

For women struggling to come to terms with an altered appearance due to cancer or related treatments, committing these changes to film could be extremely challenging. Some pictures were just too difficult, sensitive or embarrassing to take, and women did not want to make some images of themselves available – either to the researcher or to other women. For example, Linda did not want to include an image of her 'small breast' because she doesn't like 'being photographed like that' and that it might 'bother lots of people'. Georgia commented that 'the only thing missing is me with a bald head, but you're not going to get that, I couldn't have done that'. As Walker and Moulton (1989: 157) note, the 'act of photography

anticipates the future by ripping the appearance of a moment out of its time and creating a tangible image for the future of what will be the past'. Just as photographs are seen as a means of capturing the past, they are also seen as resources to be drawn on in the future. Photographs 'express a desire for memory and the act of keeping a photograph is, like other souvenirs, an act of faith in the future' (Edwards, 1999: 222). Choosing not to take particular pictures may be a way of controlling the availability of images for future reminiscence.

In contrast to bereaved parents who use photographs to create a bridge between past, present and future in order to retain a sense of themselves as parents (Riches and Dawson, 1998), here women may refuse to create particular images so as to render them unavailable for future remembering. For example, Linda who did not want to include a picture related to nausea and vomiting (one of the major side-effects of chemotherapy which she experienced as especially difficult) reflected on its absence by saying, 'I never actually had my photograph taken when I was being ill, perhaps I was a bit too proud'. She later adds, 'I don't want to remember it, these [the photographs] are memories'. In these extracts, photographs are treated as if they are synonymous with memories – the existence of a photograph ensures the continuance of the memory, while the absence of a photograph allows the memory to fade. Whether or not this really *is* the case, we would argue that women are using the notion of forgetting to manage the place of their illness within their biographical story. Georgia, who heatedly remarked that she 'didn't want any photographs of me at all during the whole thing', explained this in the following way:

I don't want any reminders, I don't want to look back at pictures of me wearing a wig. That's a reminder. I don't want to be reminded. If there's no photographic evidence your memory fades, but if you've got photographs they don't. They're permanent and I don't want that.

*(Georgia)*

People can use objects (such as photographs) to shape how they will be remembered by others in years to come (Radley, 2002). Just as it was important for some women to keep their photographs for future reminiscence, for others it was just as important to excise these images from their lives. Georgia, who threw her photographs away at the end of the interview and had also burnt her wig, remarked 'I want it all gone and out of my life'. She said she would 'probably put them in a drawer and never look at them again [ ... ] the emotions I had when I took them are not the sort of emotions I want to carry on feeling'. There is a paradox for these women: in describing and alluding to photographs that they decided not to take or did not want to take, they bring these images into being. From a social remembering approach, we can see this as communicating the idea that some things should not be captured. By refusing to take some photographs and deciding not to create images of themselves, women are seeking to control the place of illness in their biographical narratives.

Photographs are, then, commonly understood as a means for creating, capturing and making memories. It is this cultural understanding of photographs that researchers exploit when they ask participants to produce photographs for research purposes. Researchers need to take seriously the idea that participants are involved in constructing material objects which may potentially have a life and a place beyond the reach of the research process. Our participants were much more keenly aware of this than we were as researchers, and had thought carefully about what kinds of objects they wanted to manufacture and make available to the world and to themselves. As resources for remembering, photographs are imbued with the power to make experiences 'real' or available and participants may want to share these experiences without allowing them this more solid or enduring existence. Placing this choice within the hands of participants was for us an important decision. Understanding how participants implemented this choice, and how they made sense of and engaged the research tasks that we invite them to undertake, added a richness to our analyses and a depth to our understanding of their biographical journeys. These women were not simply narrating their story, they were actively engaged in deciding what stories could be told and re-told about their lives.

### Notes

- 1 Dr Diana Harcourt and I conducted the interviews when we were both based at the University of the West of England, UK. The research was funded by the Centre for Appearance Research based at the university. Further details of the centre can be found at <http://science.uwe.ac.uk/research/car.aspx>
- 2 Following Polkinghorne (1988), I use the terms narrative and storytelling somewhat interchangeably as they share a clear emphasis on the temporal ordering of events associated with a change, although others have argued that they can and perhaps should be distinguished (Scholes, 1981; Reissman, 1993).
- 3 See Harcourt and Frith (2008) or Frith and Harcourt (2007) for further methodological details.
- 4 Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of participants.

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## 6

# USING PHOTOGRAPHS OF PLACES, SPACES AND OBJECTS TO EXPLORE SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS AND MARRIAGE

*Anamika Majumdar*

This chapter explores the subjective experience of closeness in UK married life using photo-elicitation and photo-production with women of South Asian<sup>1</sup> origin. Personal relationships have become an important object of study within psychology and the social sciences in the last thirty years, reflecting the need to understand more fully experiences which are taken for granted in many people's lives. South Asian women cannot be viewed as a homogeneous category, but are differentiated by region, language, religion, wealth, education, caste, as well as the geographical area in which they now reside.

Two studies are described where photos were used as a tool to focus participants on their experiences of close relationships in particular material settings, for example the home. This orientation towards the material world was thought by the researcher to trigger memories of specific experiences and feelings associated with close relationships. While the first study involved life history interviews, where participants reflected on the different experiences of closeness over time with the aid of existing family photos (e.g. *photo-elicitation*), the second study considered how participants made sense of closeness in everyday married life through taking photos of objects and spaces related to married life (e.g. *photo-production*). It is argued here that the use of photos in narrative interviews about close relationships can move participants beyond established cultural narratives or ways of talking about closeness to the complexities of what 'doing closeness' actually entails. In each of the two studies, photographs were used in different ways and each will be examined in order to establish how each approach contributed something different to the study of closeness.

In recent academic and professional literature, there has been a focus on the experience of intimacy, which has mostly been judged as reflecting sexual relationships, romantic involvement or self-disclosure (i.e. the content of what people say to each other) in relationships (Giddens, 1992; Hinde, 1997; Jamieson, 1998). Different conversation styles for men and women in intimate relationships have also been highlighted (e.g. Tannen, 1998), implying that men and women may have different ways of 'doing' intimacy. More recently, intimacy has been described as a coexistence of separate feeling states (e.g. curiosity, vulnerability, empathy and a recognition that we cannot fully know another) which evoke feelings of closeness (Obert, 2016).

While intimacy and closeness have been used interchangeably by many authors, this chapter will focus on closeness rather than intimacy as it can be seen to include a wider range of experiences. Both intimacy and closeness can be seen as more than 'speech acts', as people can also communicate or share meaning through non-verbal means such as gestures (e.g. touch, facial expressions, moving towards or away from somebody, eye contact), symbols and silences (Weingarten, 1991; Anderson, Carleton, & Swim, 1999; Gabb & Fink, 2015). Jacqui Gabb has argued that all forms of intimacy are 'embodied', whether they involve a sensation of touch or a physical sensation in response to what someone says (Gabb, 2006). Rather than only being accessible through language, intimate or close relationship experiences can therefore be seen as grounded in the body and the physical setting in which people have these experiences (Jacobson, 2014; Maclaren, 2014). Factors such as housing, the geographical area in which married couples live, whether other family members are living with them and routines of everyday life can resource and also constrain women's experiences of marital closeness (Robinson, Hockey, & Meah, 2004; Hockey, Meah, & Robinson, 2007; Gabb, 2011; Morrison, 2012).

To understand better everyday practices in family and couple relationships, social scientists have studied people's relationship with the material space of their homes. It has been argued that houses, rooms and objects have the power to evoke memory and emotion (e.g. Hecht, 2001; Petridou, 2001; Middleton & Brown, 2005) and reflect individual self identities in different contexts (e.g. Miller, 2001, Silva, 2010). In a study of houses as a reflection of the self, Marcus (1995) asked her participants to draw their houses and talk about the pictures in an interview. Similarly, Hunt (1989) asked her participants to take photos of aspects of their home that they particularly valued and interviewed them about the photos in a study of gender and home life. Other research has involved participants being interviewed about their mantelpiece displays during life history interviews about the places they have lived (Hurdley, 2006, 2007). Pink (2013) discusses a previous research project in which she conducted a video tour collaboratively with participants, exploring their homes with a video camera to draw attention to sensory experiences of smell, sound and texture of objects in relation to memory, emotion and gendered identity construction.

Visual research methods have been particularly useful in studying people's relationship to their material environment and in capturing experiences which are difficult to put into words (Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Gabb, 2008) or too abstract (Hurworth, Clark, Martin, & Thomsen, 2005). The technique of 'emotion maps'

(Gabb, 2008) uses coloured stickers to represent emotional interactions with family members, which are placed on floor plans of family homes. The floor plans are then used to facilitate discussions about where intimate encounters occur in families. It has been argued that, in conjunction with narrative interviewing and diary-based research methods, emotion maps can provide a holistic picture of family life grounded in materiality by drawing out where, when, how and why intimacy is actually done in practice (Gabb, 2008). Photography has also been argued to be useful in orienting participants to where intimate encounters occur as physical settings are more ready at hand when people come to describe particular experiences (Deacon, 2000). As such, the use of 'family snapshots' in interviews has been thought to enhance memory retrieval and facilitate wider discussion of family relationships (Rose, 2003).

Auto-photography, where research participants are given cameras to take photos, has also become popular in researching significant life experiences such as hospitalisation (Radley & Taylor, 2003a, 2003b), chemotherapy (Frith & Harcourt, 2007), homelessness (Hodgetts, Radley, Chamberlain, & Hodgetts, 2007) and inner-city schooling (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). Auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews have helped to emphasise the link between the psycho-social and the material as participants not only talk about their photos but also the relationships and issues that they associate with them (Hodgetts, Radley, Chamberlain, & Hodgetts, 2007).

Additionally, auto-photography has been shown to be a useful tool in research with minority ethnic communities and other marginalised groups as it can allow individuals to decide what aspects of their lives to photograph and discuss at interview, rather than answering researcher-defined questions. This can be particularly useful with groups who have traditionally been less visible or heard participants in the social world (Reavey & Johnson, 2008). For example, in research on identity and self-esteem, Noland (2006) considered that she was able to see the world through the eyes of her Latina and Indian women participants in the USA, who she asked to take photos in their environment related to their identity. Other research has highlighted auto-driven photo-elicitation as a tool to increase understanding of relevant cultural and social contextual factors in Hispanic women's experience of physical activity in the USA (Keller, Fleury, Perez, Ainsworth, & Vaughan, 2008; Fleury, Keller, & Perez, 2009). More recently, as part of a study of physical intimacy in the lives of heterosexual couples in Hamilton, New Zealand, Morrison (2012) asked women to take photos of their homes and found that ordinary home spaces can take on significant meanings associated with touch, while spaces not experienced as private can inhibit expressions of touch and associated feelings of closeness.

## **Theoretical framework**

Experience-based narrative research follows the work of Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1991), resting on the phenomenological assumption that the sequential temporal ordering of experience into narrative is part of what makes us human (Squire, 2008). For Ricoeur, narratives are produced through the process of emplotment, where significance is conferred on earlier events and experiences by what comes later in time. While a narrative can be traditionally described as a sequence of events over



time, experience-based narrative research attempts to study particular experiences over time, thereby highlighting transformation, continuity and change. When talking about emotional experiences, individuals inevitably produce 'representations' constrained by words, phrases and concepts that are available to them in a particular cultural context. For example existing cultural stories of 'marriage', 'relationships' and 'South Asian women' can become resources for individuals to use in narrating their own experiences of marriage (Plummer, 1995). Critics of purely discursive approaches to research have suggested that identification with an image can be a more powerful way of capturing emotions which may be more removed from verbal articulation (Reavey & Johnson, 2008).

Reavey and Johnson (2008) also suggest that visual images can generate further talk around life experiences which do not fit neatly into pre-rehearsed personal or cultural narratives. In the current research, it was hoped that the use of photos would encourage participants to reflect more on the complexities and ambiguities of their relationships than narrative interviewing alone. Within a narrative framework, visual materials are seen as being contained within broader understandings of narrative sequence and meaningfulness (Squire, 2008). The focus is on how disjointed memories, fragments, thoughts are brought together through emplotment as a way of making sense of experiences of close relationships over time and space. As such, visual research methods do not stand alone but are analysed in conjunction with verbal or written narratives (Pink, 2013 Radley & Taylor, 2003a) .

### **The current research**

Participants for both studies were women of South Asian origin who were married and currently living in the UK. Women from different ethnic and religious groups, age groups, class backgrounds and nationalities were interviewed in order to reflect the various identifications and experiences of South Asian women in the UK. A total of 11 women took part in the first study and eight women in the second study. Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 43 years of age. All interviews were conducted in English. Pseudonyms have been used to protect anonymity. Due to space constraints, narrative analysis will not be presented here in full; instead it will be illustrated how the visual methods of photo-elicitation and auto-photography were utilised by participants in order to articulate experiences of marital closeness.

#### **Study 1 – Images and life histories: photo-elicitation**

A life history interview was conducted wherein participants were asked to talk through the different places they had lived during their teenage years and up to their present married lives and the close relationships they had in these places. To aid this process, they were asked to bring existing family photos of the homes or places where they had lived. It was hoped that the use of family photos of homes would encourage wider discussion of experiences and family relationships. In practice, participants often brought photos of themselves or their family members and friends as these were more available to them.

At the start of the interview, the researcher asked participants to lay out their photos on the table, in no particular sequence or order. A semi-structured interview schedule was followed which asked questions about who participants were close to in the different places they had lived and in what ways they were close. Sometimes participants gave spontaneous accounts of their pictures, and this was used as a starting point to talk about where they had lived and the relationships they had. Where they did not engage spontaneously with their photos, the researcher attempted to encourage participants to make links to the photos. In some cases, they chose to make minimal references to the pictures, or preferred to speak without them. Overall, participants were not pushed to focus on their photos and where photos were not available or not used, individuals were instead asked to describe their family homes and the relationships between family members and other people in these settings. To protect confidentiality, no copies were taken of participants' family photos and only interview data was transcribed and analysed.

Some participants simply drew on the photos as documentation of events or relationships, for example to point out different family members to the researcher, while others used the photos in a sequence to tell a story about their life, moving from one photo to another. References were often made to the physical intimacy apparent in certain photos, in order to comment on how close relationships had changed over time. For example, one participant compared a photo of herself and her father when she was a child to a more recent photo of them. In the first photo, her father was carrying her on his shoulders, while in the later photo, her father was sitting down and she had her hands placed on his shoulders. The participant interpreted these photos as depicting changes in her closeness to her father over time, which reflected socio-cultural norms of reduced physical contact between father and daughter in adulthood. Another participant who spoke at length about being closer to her father than her mother while growing up referred to a photo which showed the 'factuality' of her and her father holding hands on her wedding day, while there were no similar photos of her and her mother. Photos were therefore used in some cases as 'evidence' for documenting closeness in family relationships, as they often depicted the embodied practices of close relationships (e.g. touching, standing close together, hugging or holding hands).

Photos were also used as a platform to connect with and explore particular emotions which were difficult to put into words or explain rationally. In one case, a participant brought out an artist's book of photos during an interview to show a photo which helped to make sense of how she didn't feel comfortable living in a particular area during her teenage years. The photo depicted an Asian woman and her children standing round a street corner staring at a white family who were dressed up and coming out of a house. The participant reflected that this was the opposite of her experience of growing up as the only Asian girl in a white area where she felt that she and her family were hyper-visible.

### ***Analysis***

Overall, photos were not used as much as it was hoped in study 1, as most participants were not interested in engaging with them in detail, preferring to give verbal narrative accounts of their close relationships in different places. It could be that some felt that photos limited or disrupted their flow of thoughts and narratives about the relationships rather than aiding them. For the analysis, a case-study approach was adopted where narratives of closeness/lack of closeness were delineated over the course of each interview. Attention was paid to emplotment and sequencing, focusing on how close relationships (e.g. with family members, romantic partners or husbands) were described as changing or continuing over time and over different spaces and places (e.g. houses, towns, cities and countries). The particular focus was participants' ambivalent and conflicting feelings in close relationships. Each participant's interview was analysed as a case study, and similar storylines of relationships over time were then delineated across participants.

The photos themselves were not analysed in this study; however there are several examples where they triggered particular memories of interactions or episodes in close relationships, thereby inviting participants to reflect on conflicting feelings. In the following extract, Shabana, a 28-year-old British Pakistani Muslim participant who has been married for 12 years to a Pakistani man, uses a sequence of three photos to describe her ambivalent feelings about a particular time in her marriage. The first photo is of her and her husband with his male friends, the second is of her holding a teddy bear and the third is of her and her husband holding hands:

#### ***Extract 1: Shabana***

S: these are also pictures of when we went to visit somebody's house but they were away so we [her husband, his friends and Shabana] stayed in their house for like 4 days or something ... like I said everybody was so much older than me, I was just alone and I used to sit around mostly and I just thought ... I'd sit and chat and stuff but everyone just used to think I was a child or you know I'm the child of the group and nobody used to talk to ... erm much, they would just laugh amongst each other and have their own little conversations – which you can see in the next picture, I'm holding a teddy bear, so I'm the child – so (...) – even there you can see – I mean we're holding hands there so ... it was alright-ish till then

R: ok

S: I remember this time as well, we had had an argument there and it was really funny (R: OK) I was feeling really left out – they've taken the picture, you can't see

R: yeah

S: coz obviously everyone's on this side

R: yeah

S: but there was about six other guys there at the time and I was just feeling really really left out – you know when you feel kind of inadequate, left out, because obviously they're all men and you're the only woman, and you have to keep your mouth shut and stay to one side and whatever

R: hmm

S: and I just got really annoyed and I felt really bad and I said 'I'm beginning to hate all this' and he was like ... he had this habit of telling me off like you know I'm just a kid or something – so I used to feel like 'oh god maybe I was wrong' – I mean there's a lot of self doubt coz I used to think maybe I am wrong

R: sure

S: but then .... I mean it doesn't matter now, it's done, but at that time I just felt that you know maybe if I had had a chance to sort of say that 'I don't like this, it's not fair, it's not fun' but I always had this ... I was always easily undermined – that 'oh you're wrong' – so I'd be 'OK I'm wrong'

The main narrative developed throughout Shabana's interview is the lack of emotional intimacy between her and her husband and the gradual breakdown of their marriage. Looking at the first photo, Shabana reflects on habitual memories of going on trips with her husband and his male friends. She describes feeling alone and ignored by the group who see her as a 'child'. At this point, she draws on the second photograph as evidence, stating 'which you can see in the next photograph, I'm holding the teddy bear so I'm the child'. The 'factuality' of the image suggests that holding a teddy bear, which can be seen as a powerful cultural image of childishness, places Shabana in the position of a child in this situation. She quickly moves on to the last photograph, of her and her husband holding hands, taken by one of her husband's friends. The physical evidence of them 'holding hands' in the photograph appears to invite Shabana to reflect that 'it was alright-ish till then'. She then recalls a detailed memory of the set of events during which this photograph was taken, describing an argument with her husband and feelings of being left out as the only woman in the group. She reflects on her complex and troubling feelings of being annoyed at being undermined by her husband and his male friends. She then brings us back to the present time by stating 'it doesn't matter now, it's done', signalling that her life is very different now. She concludes her reflection by employing an imaginary narrative saying 'you know maybe if I had had a chance to sort of say that "I don't like this"', suggesting that if she had had a chance to express her feelings to her husband without being undermined, things might have been different.

In Shabana's account, the first photograph sets the scene for her to describe events and the second photograph supports her narrative. The last photograph however depicts signs of intimacy between her and her husband which cause her to reflect further on her narrative. This reflection possibly opens up a detailed memory and interpretation from Shabana about her agency in being able to communicate effectively in her marital relationship.

## **Study 2 – Taking photos to depict marriage: photo-production**

The majority of participants in study 1 did not engage with photos of the places where they had lived during the life history interview, preferring to speak freely without them. Study 2 was therefore designed to make photos of places where close relationships occurred more central to the interview process. It was felt by the researcher that a focus on the objects and spaces which participants relate to in their everyday married life would allow more of an emphasis on the experience of the marital relationship than asking participants to purely speak about their married life. Such a focus was considered to potentially bring into participants' awareness aspects of their married life and relationship that do not fit easily into existing cultural narratives or ways of talking about marriage, while participants' reflections will inevitably be constrained by such narratives (Reavey & Johnson, 2008).

Different participants were recruited to take part in study 2. They were given written instructions which invited them to take 10–12 photos, using a disposable camera provided, of objects, spaces and places that they felt were important to their experience of marriage in everyday life. Furthermore, participants were asked 'not to think about it too much', but to take photos of 'the first things that came into their heads' and were specifically asked not to take photos of people, as it was thought that most participants would otherwise take photos of their husband and family members instead of engaging with the objects and spaces of their wider material environment.

Once the photos had been taken, they were asked to post the camera back to the researcher within 3 weeks. The instructions also stated the final part of the research would involve an informal conversation-style interview with the researcher where they would be asked to briefly tell the story of their marriage and then discuss their photos which had been developed by the researcher. Similar to Noland's (2006) research, participants often kept the cameras for a longer period of time, sometimes for 2–3 months, explaining that they were finding it difficult to find the time to think of what to photograph.

The researcher developed the photos but did not view them until the participants had a chance to organise and arrange them at interview. It was felt that this would give participants a chance to filter out any that they regretted taking or did not wish to discuss at interview (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). In contrast to the broad life history approach taken in the previous study, participants were asked to describe how they met their husband and talk about different episodes or stages in their marriage up to the present time. This was asked to provide a background to the photos for the researcher, so that participants would not have to constantly explain their marital history when talking about their photos. Most participants chose to describe significant events such as their engagements, weddings, honeymoons, moving house or buying a house, and having children. While some gave a brief description of their marriage, others spoke for more than an hour in this part of the interview. They were not asked to talk specifically about marital closeness and the researcher did not often probe for further information. It was felt by the researcher that asking participants to talk specifically about closeness might

allude to a canonical social science or clinical account of a 'good' marriage involving emotionality and communication. It was considered that participants might feel under pressure to present their experience in line with normative social expectations of marriage.

Participants were then asked to lay their photos out in a sequence and to describe each photograph in turn, along with their reason for taking it. At the end of the interview they were asked to choose a photo or photos that best depicted their marriage and were asked which other photos they would have liked to take if they were not restricted to objects and spaces. Some participants described difficulty in deciding what to photograph, as they would have liked to have included family members. Photos were often taken in collaboration with their husband and/or other family members, and some were taken alone. For some participants, their photos therefore reflected a joint presentation of the marriage by husband and wife or brother and sister, while for others the photos reflected a very personal account of their marriage.

They were additionally asked about the process of taking photos, namely about their thought processes in deciding what to photograph and how they found the experience overall. Several participants started by thinking about important themes or issues such as emotional closeness, sexual intimacy, shared interests or passions and took photos to reflect these. Some participants attempted to take photos to tell a story of their marriage over time, while others chose to focus their photos on a particular situation in which they currently found themselves, e.g. life after the birth of a child and family members coming to live with them. One participant described walking around her house taking photos of 'whatever jumped out'. All participants described enjoying the act of taking pictures, with some valuing the time to reflect in depth on their relationship. The photos and interview together often provided a time and space to acknowledge the value of their marital relationship. A couple of participants described being a little anxious prior to the interview about what relationship issues might 'come out' of discussing the photos.

Digital copies were made of the photos and participants were offered a copy of their photos at the end of the interview but they mostly declined, with only one person deciding to keep only one of her photos. It was agreed in advance that the photos would be used for research purposes only through written consent prior to interview. However participants were asked throughout the interview process to point out any photos that they would not like published in the research.

Several participants chose to tell a chronological narrative of their married life through their sequence of photos, describing different stages of their marriage. Those who did not build a chronological sequence chose particular 'themes' or 'aspects' which they considered important in their marriage overall (e.g. the sharing of culture or religion, household tasks, furnishing a home together, hobbies and the husband's personality) and placed photos that were on similar topics together and spoke about each topic in turn. It is significant that participants often chose similar objects to photograph (e.g. houses, cars, cookers, beds, computers and televisions). Despite this, these objects symbolised a number of different things for different participants and also within each participant's narrative. Photos taken were often

symbols of a marital relationship which indicated shared interests and activities, religious beliefs, values and passions as well as gifts that had been exchanged. Some photos were also used as symbols for particular feelings that were hard to describe in words (see Frith & Harcourt, 2007); for example, one participant took a photo of a flower to symbolise love, intimacy, innocence and companionship in her marriage. Other photos taken were symbols of differences or areas of tension in the marital relationship, such as the negotiation of housework. One participant who was considering separating from her husband took a series of photos to depict events and experiences symbolising the gradual breakdown of her marriage, such as arguments or conflict over a house, car and finances, sleeping in different bedrooms and the husband's relationship with their children.

### ***Analysis***

Each interview was analysed by paying attention to the sequencing or thematic arrangement of photos in each interview along with participants' narrative meaning making around them. The researcher considered whether there was a main storyline or plot that each participant was trying to convey, and how the photos aided or constrained this process. Often, particular photos triggered memories for participants, opening up other storylines that they had not previously considered. In some cases, participants used their photos to tell a chronological story over time, while in other cases, the arrangement of photos conveyed a 'snapshot' of their married life at the present time. Since several participants photographed similar objects and spaces, narratives related to different categories of photo (as discussed above) were also analysed across the eight interviews in this study.

### ***Case study: Zahra***

In the following interview, Zahra, a 25-year-old British Pakistani Muslim woman who has been married for 3 years to a British Pakistani man, uses her photos to convey an overall storyline of the couple's closeness and adjustment to each other being recently disrupted by her mother-in-law coming to live with them.

While Zahra's first and last photo indicate a chronological sequence, each remaining photo does not follow a clear sequence or theme, but depicts the disruption of married life for her. Each object or space therefore encompasses her feeling about the past ('how things were') and the present ('how things have changed'). Each object or space is significant in Zahra's daily experience of disruption in her married life. The first photo is the place where her husband proposed to her, while the last photo of an estate agent reflects her hope of moving away from her mother-in-law by moving house. The sequence of remaining photos includes their car, the cooker, the television, their house, her parents' house and their bed. Due to space constraints, only one photo will be examined here alongside Zahra's explanation of why she chose it., to illustrate how she uses the image to help her construct and compare narratives of the past and the present (Figure 6.1).



Figure 6.1 The television. 'The photograph was produced by the participant for research purposes to depict a space which she felt was important in her everyday experience of marriage'.

### *Extract 2*

Z: that one, erm ... that's this room, the telly – that's the way we spend a lot of our time together or we did spend a lot of our time watching TV in the evenings when you come home from work but now not so much ... don't really watch TV here coz as I said his mum's watching her programmes here so we don't really watch it any more. I think that was just something so we could unwind, just relax and you know just lounge about

R: hmm

Z: don't get that relaxing kind of time any more – there's nothing for you to do (...)

R: so that was a valued part of your relationship that has kind of been lost for the temporary period?

Z: exactly – it was almost like to get dinner ready in time for *EastEnders*, that was the aim – get through the door, get dinner ready in time for *EastEnders*, erm you know jump in front of the TV, watch *EastEnders* and have dinner, that was the time that we had

R: so it's like an unwinding?

Z: yeah – after I drive home from my mum's it's a bit difficult, you prefer to unwind at home but you're having to do it somewhere else, and it's freezing nowadays – (...) I'd prefer it if we could just relax at home and just watch our TV, just put a DVD on or something .... It's only because I want that sense of



that home, I just want that feeling which is why I think I go there coz I don't think I get that, coz to me it's quite important.

R: sure

Z: so I'm in search of that feeling and once I get it and I feel like I've topped myself up with it, now I'm going to go back home, and that's it. That's what it is.

The photo shows a large television in the corner of a living room with a coffee table, sofa and curtains on either side of it. The floor has a beige carpet, giving the room a feeling of warmth. Zahra appears to have taken it while standing in the corner of the room. This photograph comes in the middle of her sequence of objects and spaces. The photograph is introduced as 'this room, the telly', as a place where Zahra and her husband spend time together, watching TV to unwind and relax. The present and the past conflict in Zahra's narrative, as she moves backwards and forwards in time, explaining that this way of spending time with her husband is now a thing of the past. This space is now used by her mother-in-law who watches 'her programmes' there. Zahra describes that she and her husband used to have a habitual routine of getting dinner ready in time to watch the soap-opera *EastEnders*. To relax and unwind, she drives to her mum's house, to get that 'sense of home' and 'top herself up' with that feeling before returning to her own home late at night. The image of the television and living room symbolises for Zahra that sense of 'home', that has been lost even if the space and objects are still there. It also represents a loss of this special time with her husband.

It is significant that Zahra has had time to reflect on the sequence of photos she wishes to present at interview and the story she wishes to show as well as tell to the researcher. As well as evoking memories of the past, arranging the photos and describing her reasons for taking them allow Zahra to reflect more deeply on her feelings of the loss of 'home'. Taken together, her sequence of photos depicts both the cosiness and intimacy of the past and the feeling that it has been lost since her mother-in-law has moved in with her and her husband. Taking the photos in the context of the research interview allowed Zahra to show the researcher the practical issues involved in 'doing intimacy' in marriage, rather than only talking about her married life. The photos themselves therefore have no particular meaning outside of the personal meanings that flow through them, as described in the verbal accounts.

## Discussion

The aim of the two studies was to explore the experience of closeness in participants' lives and particularly in marriage. As well as examining how closeness is conceptualised and spoken about using established cultural narratives, it was hoped that the use of visual methods with the focus on spaces, places and objects would emphasise aspects of relationships that are taken for granted such as the everyday 'doing' of close relationships. However, a narrative approach recognises that participants' accounts cannot provide a direct access to their lived experience, but reflect narrative structures and resources available to them as they tell their story. Furthermore, it must be remembered that visual narratives, like oral and

written ones, are created for audiences and 'do not generate unmediated, unclassified portraits of an "essential self"' (Reissman, 2008, p.177). Empirical research data is not created spontaneously by participants in everyday life but is always created with an audience in mind.

Therefore visual methods may not necessarily generate 'more authentic' representations of experience but may disrupt or rupture cultural or personal narratives by encouraging more reflection and thought in selecting objects and spaces to photograph (Reissman, 2008). While chronological sequencing over time is a defining feature of narrative accounts, the use of photos in both studies appeared to momentarily displace pre-rehearsed narratives of relationships, opening up memories and reflections that were not always readily available to individuals (Reavey & Johnson, 2008). In both of the current research studies, participants were often surprised when photos evoked particular feelings and memories that they had not fully anticipated.

In this brief discussion, I will consider the particular role played by photos in the two studies described. In study 1, it was hoped that family photos of participants' homes would play a major part in anchoring and structuring participants' relationship life histories through the evoking of particular memories and feelings. However, it was often difficult to find photos of the places they had lived and participants mostly did not wish to engage with their family photos when giving an account of their lives. This may reflect the fact that the majority of participants felt limited and constrained by family photos when presenting a verbal account of their life. For those who did engage with them, the photos were sometimes used to reflect back on particular memories and emotions associated with certain events and experiences in light of the participant's present situation. However, the photos were more often used as documentary evidence of particular events or relationships at particular times. Since the family photos were not taken for research purposes and were mostly not taken by the participants themselves, they may not have held personal meaning for participants in the research context. Additionally, the memories and experiences evoked would be limited by the range of family photos available to participants to bring to the interview. Therefore, it could be that participants felt more freedom to reflect on and construct their life histories without their photos.

In contrast, the photos taken by participants for study 2 can be seen to reflect their 'way of seeing' their world at the present time (Berger, 1972), for the purposes of the research, rather than a mechanical record. The photos could therefore be used to symbolise feelings and relationships as well as documenting events and activities (Frith & Harcourt, 2007). Auto-driven photo-production has been considered to be useful for allowing participants to select experiences and aspects of their lives that are meaningful to them and having more control over what they discuss at interview (Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Samuels, 2004). For example, a semi-structured interview schedule was followed in study 1, where participants were asked who they were close to while living in particular places and how they were close. It is possible that participants felt the need to give normative accounts of their close relationships based on what they felt the

researcher wanted to hear and what was socially and culturally acceptable. In study 2, participants were not asked particular questions about their marital relationship but were able to focus on how the photos they had taken were meaningful to them. This has been described by Samuels (2004) as the ‘breaking of the frames’ of the researcher, in his auto-driven photo-elicitation study of the lives of young Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka. He found that participants often highlighted meaningful activities such as sweeping, which he did not initially consider to be important to monastic life.

The data in study 2 emphasised the private worlds, everyday lives and environments of participants which would not normally be accessible to researchers (Frith & Harcourt, 2007), as well as drawing attention to the more practical side of ‘doing closeness’ in marriage. Photos of spaces and objects depicted how and where closeness was done and which aspects of everyday life resourced or constrained experiences of closeness in married life (see Ahmed, Reavey, & Majumdar, 2008; Morrison, 2012).

Several participants reflected that taking the photos had made them think deeply about the constitutive aspects of their married life. Using visual images to separate married life into different components may therefore provide more depth and may draw out aspects and experiences which may not normally be discussed in verbal interviewing alone. Similarly, Samuels (2004) found that, through discussing their photos, his participants gave richer, more concrete descriptions based on their personal experience, emotions and interactions with others than in word-only interviews.

In summary, the use of photos of physical spaces and places where marriage and relationships are played out allowed participants to explore memories and emotions associated with these material settings. It has been argued that photos do not elicit more information, but a different type of information (Harper, 2002). In verbal accounts, participants can be seen as accounting for being in close relationships with particular people (e.g. husbands and family members) as well as for their behaviour in close relationships. In the current research, photos allowed participants access to more specific memories than verbal narrative methods alone and a deeper exploration of subjective, relational and spatially located experiences of close relationships. This was achieved using images as well as words to represent and articulate a particular experience, memory or feeling to the researcher. A continuous shifting back and forth between verbal and visual meaning making therefore provided the opportunity for new insights and feelings arising from the discussion of photos to be re-integrated back into narrative reflections of marriage and relationships.

## **Note**

- 1 The term ‘South Asian’ is usually taken to refer to people who originate from the Indian subcontinent, which may include countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bhutan.

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# 7

## REFLECTIONS ON A PHOTO-PRODUCTION STUDY

Practical, analytic and epistemic issues

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### **Introduction**

As indicated by the timely publication of this second edition of *Visual Methods in Psychology*, the place of qualitative methods within psychology has changed enormously in the past two decades. What were once considered unsystematic and even ‘unscientific’ approaches are now properly recognised as viable strategies for data collection and analysis that are essential for the detailed study of relational psychological properties and phenomena. Yet within this general movement, individual qualitative methods appear to be developing at slightly different rates. Discourse analysis (DA), for example, has benefited from sustained dialogue within and beyond the discipline, from the appearance of Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) classic text. And in seeking to develop an integrative rather than oppositional stance, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (e.g. Smith et al., 2009) has become one of the most successful qualitative methodological exports from psychology to other disciplines.

Visual methods, however, appear to be on a slightly different trajectory. The level of agreement and proceduralisation around how to apply visual approaches is far looser compared to both DA and IPA. Moreover, the very existence of visual methods within psychology sometimes goes unrecognised by authors in different social science and humanities fields. In this chapter, we want to reflect on the challenges of doing visual-based research within psychology and argue that this apparent lack of systematisation is indicative of tensions within the relationship between the visual and the discursive aspects of experience, and furthermore, that these tensions should be the central concern of analysis.

In Chapter 1, Paula Reavey points out that, whilst the emergence of what we now call 'visual methods' is relatively recent, the visual has been a longstanding object of concern within psychological enquiry. Perhaps unsurprisingly, much of this concern has traditionally been with the interpretative responses made by individual participants to standardised visual stimuli rather than with the sociocultural aspects of the visual. Where participants have been encouraged to create their own images, these have been treated as 'windows' on to cognitive-developmental processes rather than interactionally produced objects in their own right (in much the same way that 'talk' was traditionally considered – see Edwards, 1997). But within this it is nevertheless striking that some of the most well known examples of visually grounded research in psychology, such as the Thematic Apperception Test and the Rorschach Test, are structured around an ambiguity in interpretation, and that this ambiguity is considered a productive dimension of experience rather than an obstacle to enquiry. It is important to retain some sensitivity to the power of processes of ambiguity and ambivalence within visual methods. For example, looking back at the images and film clips from Kurt Lewin's 'leadership studies' (Lewin, 1997), there seems to be a tension between what we see in the interactions of the young people and the overarching discourse of 'social climates' in the narrative voice-over. We cannot help but wonder about the relationship between the staging of the images, the dynamics around the participation of the young people and the absent, seemingly omniscient narrator.

Taking this notion of ambiguity forward, we want to describe three modes – practical, analytic and epistemic – in which a lack or an absence of clarity creates a productive tension within visual methods. The first mode (*practical*) concerns the procedures through which visual approaches are conducted. In comparison with interviewing or ethnographic observation, there is far less sense of what constitutes 'good practice' in terms of working with visual materials. Should we maintain a commitment to a 'co-production' model around the process of generating images with participants, or is systematisation critical to the data corpus? Are photographs preferable to drawing or other forms of visual material, and at what point do we need to consider the technical skills and visual literacy of participants as being relevant? Is it the images themselves that are the key object of focus, or is it the process of their constitution that is the real concern?

The second mode (*analytic*) centres on what we do, as analysts, with the outcomes of visual research. How is the data corpus of visual materials to be organised and subsequently made available for interpretation? Is it possible to maintain an entirely inductive approach to images, or does theory inevitably enter into the process, and, if so, when and how? To what extent are frameworks from more established forms of visual analysis (i.e. photography, film studies, cultural theory) helpful to psychological enquiry?

Finally, the third mode (*epistemic*) raises questions around the nature of the image itself and how it relates to sense-making practices organised through discourse and broader a-subjective aspects of experience. Here Michel Foucault's (1983) essay on René Magritte's painting *This is not a pipe* serves as a guide to thinking through the tension between the visual and the discursive, and the

question of what it is that we are doing when we recruit others into an account of the world that is partly accomplished through the use of visual materials.

Throughout the chapter we will be reflecting upon one particular study, involving the use of a photo-production method with service users detained within a medium-secure forensic psychiatric unit (see Kanyeredzi et al., 2019; Reavey et al., 2019; Tucker et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2019a, 2019b). All images used in this chapter are taken directly from the study. We will discuss each mode of concern in turn, before concluding with final considerations.

### **First mode – The practicalities of visual research**

The study was framed by research questions around the relationship between the material space of the unit and the experiences of mental health service users during their time detained there under a ‘section’ of the Mental Health Act. The medium-secure unit we gained access to formed part of the forensic care pathway within a hospital site in a large city in the south of the UK. Service users typically spend between 18 months and 3 years ‘sectioned’ within the unit. During the early part of this period, service users are restricted to locked wards, where they live in individual bedrooms. Over time, service users are able to make use of more facilities on the unit, including garden spaces and cafeteria, before eventually being allowed a small amount of ground leave, which is a precursor to moving to low-secure and community-based care. Given that service users spend such a long time in a comparatively small, enclosed environment, visual methods were both feasible, in that it was a limited environment to potentially document, and analytically valuable, since the experience of being detained created a relationship to the immediate space that was very particular and would be difficult for researchers to access through other means.

The research team decided to use a photo-production method, based on previous experience with both this particular method and with researching locked psychiatric ward spaces (Brown et al., 2014). The primary reason for adopting the method was based on a conceptual view that the experience of space involves a range of embodied and affective dimensions that are irreducible to discursive description. This is not to say that they cannot be verbally articulated, but rather that experience always over-spills such descriptions, and is grounded in ways of moving through the space itself. We wanted to enable participants to be able to show something of how they experienced the space by depicting it in photographs which they took of the ward and surrounding areas. But these photographs would also form the basis for interviews with researchers, where participants discussed the images, why they had taken them, what their significance was in relation to the experience of detention and how the space impacted upon their emotions and their ways of making sense of their current circumstances and future prospects.

Crucial to the study was that all the service user participants had lived experience of distress and had been diagnosed with one or more mental health issues. Most participants were also taking a variety of mental health medications, which had a number of effects on their mood, energy levels and general physical



health. For example, excessive weight gain is a widely shared side effect of taking anti-psychotic medication, which in turn affects perceptions of self and body-image, and thus how service users relate to daily practices of eating, exercise and interactions with others (see McGrath et al., submitted). Since this was a forensic pathway, all of the service users who participated had an 'index offence' (i.e. a criminal conviction) and most had been transferred from the prison estate. Whilst the research project itself was not concerned with the nature of these index offences, we were nevertheless aware that the comparison between the secure unit and prison would be an issue for many participants. For example, in previous research, the freedom to smoke whilst in prison was cited by many participants as a reason for their dislike of hospital care (where smoking is formally banned) (see Brown & Reavey, 2016).

All research with patients in health-care settings in the UK is required to consider patient public involvement in its design, sometime referred to as 'co-production' (see Beresford, 2019). The term was originally developed in service research to indicate the necessity of involving service users in setting both the agenda and the design of the research. There has been considerable debate about the extent to which co-production is meaningful with mental health research, and the extent to which service users feel they are genuinely heard and involved within the research process (Madden & Speed, 2017; Rose & Kalathil, 2019). The co-production element within this study was centred around the photo-production method, which we felt would give participants some degree of control in setting the agenda for the interviews. We also felt that the experience of taking photographs of the ward space might be both empowering and enjoyable for participants, given the repetitive nature of routine activities on wards of this kind. Many participants did indeed appear to enjoy participation, based on their requests to keep the photographs afterwards, but the extent to which co-production can be restricted to the use of a particular method inevitably remains debatable (see Reavey & Johnson, 2017).

We received considerable support and engagement from the staff on the unit, including senior gatekeepers, which resulted in fewer issues than might otherwise have been expected during the process of acquiring National Health Service ethical clearance. One key practical issue was how to provide service users with camera equipment. Locked wards have strict regulations on what items may be brought on the ward space, and most electronic equipment is proscribed. The solution in this case was for a member of ward staff to accompany service users with the camera, and to assist them in taking the images of the unit over a fixed period of time. This did, however, raise the issue of the extent to which the images taken could be said to be the sole product of the participant. Some images, for example, contained the participant themselves, and were clearly jointly arranged with the member of staff rather than 'selfies'. In this respect, being able to discuss the images with participants rather than treating them as a corpus in themselves was important, in that the issues around their production could be explored. An unexpected bonus of the joint production process was that recruitment to the study increased as other

### *Reflections on a photo-production study*

service users saw the photographs being taken and were able to approach staff to express interest in the study.

The photographs were subsequently printed and arranged as booklets which served as the basis for interviews conducted within a week of the images being produced. We had designed a full interview schedule which aimed to systematically work through the photographs. In practice, however, the schedule proved to be of only limited use and the interviews were mostly grounded in reflections on the contents of the photographs themselves. Take, for example, Figure 7.1.

The researcher here invited the participant to describe why she had taken this image, what was important about it and so on. The participant was, however, unable to offer any significant reasons for taking the photograph other than it being of a space where she spent some time on a daily basis. Further prompts were then made to elicit what she valued about that particular space, noting features such as the prominent flowers and shrubbery. These were again met with minimal responses. Finally, the conversation shifted to what kinds of activities the service user enjoyed doing in this space, to which the response was that there was nothing to do in the space, that it was, in fact, quite a boring place to be in, and so on.

In this way the photograph does not really provide an immediate visual insight (although, once mentioned, it is indeed clear that there is nothing much to do



*Figure 7.1* The outside space of the ward.

here), but rather serves as a point of departure for a series of reflections on actual experiences of the space. This is important because interviews conducted with detained service users face a number of challenges. Participants are quite rightly suspicious of the motives of researchers, and of the purpose of the research, even with the knowledge provided by information sheets during the participant consent process. It can be difficult to properly distinguish the agenda of a social science interview from other kinds of interactions with visitors to the ward, resulting in minimal answers or an unwillingness to expand upon responses. Furthermore, mental health medication can lead to participants becoming tired by prolonged interaction or struggling with an extended conversation. Sticking to the details of the photographs can then provide both a coherent thread through the interview and act to reassure the participant that it is indeed their experiences that are of interest. These can extend beyond the visual and move to more multi-modal aspects of experience. The discussion of the image above, for instance, opened out how the participant felt the temperature of the sun and wind on her skin whilst in the garden, and how this served as an unpleasant reminder that she was detained and did not have the freedom to move in outside space as she would like.

In the study we did not encounter any instances where participants were unable or unwilling to discuss the photographs they had taken (although this possibility should, in our experience, always be anticipated, especially if the visual component is created within the interview itself). However, putting the focus on the image itself can create some difficulties depending on construction of the photograph. Figure 7.2 is rich in interpretative possibilities. Note the close framing of the plant at the centre of the image, which is turned at precisely the right angle to form a juxtaposition with the large metal window frame and the security fence below. In comparison with this, the plant looks fragile, perhaps even a little ‘hesitant’ as it is turned towards the sunlight streaming in. Now, whilst all of these interpretations may well follow from the artful construction of the image, demonstrating the creative skills of the participant, they may also just as well be the outcome of a fortuitous chance placement of the plant by the window, or something somewhere in between. The interview itself did little to clarify this, although it did occasion some important reflections around the inside and outside spaces of the unit itself (see Tucker et al., 2019). We might then say that, whilst the visual literacy of participants is meaningful to the production of images, it cannot of itself be taken as a cue for interpretation within the interview. Sticking closely to the details of what is *seeable in* rather than what is *sayable about* the image seems to offer a better interactional thread.

## Second mode – Analysis of the corpus

Across the 21 service users who participated in the study (all names subsequently used are pseudonyms), 136 usable images were produced and discussed. The smallest number of photographs taken by a participant was two, and the largest 13. As invited in the participant information, the majority of photographs depicted a particular area of the ward, with the most common being patient bedrooms, open



*Figure 7.2* The plant on the window sill.

communal spaces, kitchens and the central nurse's station on the ward. In the absence of a specific theoretical starting point – beyond our overall concerns with space and experience – coding the images proved difficult. For example, it was possible to group the images into public versus private spaces, but the analytic value of doing so was very limited, given that this separation of space is in any case the most pertinent aspect of the ward, and would inevitably be depicted across the corpus. The photographs, by themselves, did not add greatly to our understanding of the meaning of this spatial division for participants. We also resisted the temptation to interpret either the number or the nature of the images taken by individual participants, since a whole range of contingent factors might have been in play during the joint production process, including whether it was interrupted by other activities or tiredness on the part of the service user, and so on.

This led us to consider heterogeneity within the corpus itself, including images of spaces that occurred rarely. One such image was of a public telephone on one ward (Figure 7.3). It might be expected that, as one of the few means through which service users have contact with persons and communities beyond the walls and locked doors of the secure unit, the telephone might have been depicted more often across the corpus. However, in the interview where the image was discussed, the service user described his irritation at passing the phone when it was ringing



Figure 7.3 The public telephone on the ward.

(i.e. when an outside caller was dialling in to the public telephone). So, rather than the telephone serving as a valued means to seek connection outside the unit, it was actually experienced as a disruptive incursion of the outside into the closed space of the ward. Now, whilst there was little evidence across the interviews as a whole to suggest the public telephone was always experienced in this way by service users, this particular example did sensitise us to the potential reversibility between inside and outside. In other words, the aspects of space that we might take to be markers of inside and outside – walls, gardens, doors – might not have a clear semiotic valence. Both the location of the boundary marking the limits of detention and its meaning might be subject to ongoing shifts during the course of a section (we explore this further in Tucker et al., 2019).

It was more often the case, however, that considering the images directly alongside the relevant sections of the interview was the most instructive analytic starting point. That is to say, comparing the image with the interview-based interaction which it afforded. Vincent, for example, had produced an image of himself sat in a chair placed in one of the central areas (Figure 7.4). It is worth mentioning that in prior visits to the unit, we had noticed that Vincent was often to be found sat in this chair and were curious about his reasons for doing so. Whilst we did not directly communicate this to either Vincent or the staff, it may



*Figure 7.4* Vincent sat in a chair on the ward.

be that our prior interest was a factor in his production of the image. The original image itself – before anonymisation – depicts Vincent as appearing relatively relaxed and sat low in the chair, although it is clearly specifically posed for the study.

The corresponding section of the interview then runs as follows. Vincent is asked the usual prompt as to why he has taken this particular image, to which he responds:

*Vincent:* Well that armchair is next to the pool table. And people usually sit there. You sit there and watch people, watch each other play. So I take a turn and I get up and play pool and someone else sits there. When I finish, he gets up and goes and plays pool and then I sit down. It depends if I win. The winner stays on.

*Interviewer:* Oh. So when you're sitting in this –

*Vincent:* Well you can sit down and watch the TV or – cause it's there – you can see who comes in and everything from outside and inside and down the corridor. Then they go in the office or they go in there, or it it's a doctor or a nurse or whoever.

We initially found it difficult to make sense of this extract, partly because we had not previously noticed the proximity to the pool table or been present when service users were playing on it. From a discursive perspective it is also worth noting the formulation that ‘people usually sit there’, which constructs Vincent’s specific reasons for doing so as less noteworthy. That this was not the answer we were expecting is perhaps hearable in the interviewer’s initial turn – ‘Oh. So when you’re sitting in this’. However Vincent’s subsequent turn expands on his initial formulation to offer further reasons for occupying a position at the centre of the ward, where it is possible to observe comings and goings on to the ward. Now this latter formulation might offer an interpretative route to building an argument around surveillance on the unit. Staff routinely monitor and observe service users during both day and night, and this core aspect of detention in a secure unit is designed into the architectural design of the built environment, with its use of a cruciform design of wings and corridors, the maintenance of clear sightlines throughout, door viewers on patient bedrooms etc. On this basis, we might be tempted to see Vincent’s daily routines as a kind of ‘counter-surveillance’ made in response. Whilst we have developed an argument along these lines about the ‘reversibility’ of surveillance on the unit (see Brown et al., 2019a), our concern there was mainly with sound rather than vision and did not use Vincent’s comments.

The issue here is that of both wanting to stick closely to what Vincent says and the image he produced, whilst also seeking a way to make sense of his experience in a broader sense than is directly apparent in these two pieces of data. This, it seems to us, is one of the key challenges of visual research. A discursive approach, for example, would be tightly geared to either the interactional sequence of talk itself, or the subject positions implied therein, whilst a semiotic approach might restrict itself to what can be seen in the image of Vincent in the chair. But what we were concerned with was not the immediate meaning of either piece of data, but rather how they together express something of the sense of being detained for Vincent. Sense is something that slides between the sayable and seeable, without being reducible to either. To explore this further, we found it useful to invert the perspective of the image, to consider what it was that Vincent could see from his position on the chair. Fortuitously there were several other images within the corpus that provided this perspective, including Figure 7.5.

In this image, we have an additional point of reference for Vincent’s comments. We can see that it is indeed possible to monitor ‘everything from outside and inside and down the corridor’. From our own observations, we can also confirm that a shift of one’s glance to the left (where the nurses’ station is located) and to the right (where the television is positioned in a communal area) can provide an overview of much of what is happening in the public area of the ward at any given time. All of this then confirms the meaning of what Vincent says – that the chair puts you at the centre of things – and suggests reasons why that statement might have occurred in the interview, such as Vincent wanting to position himself as someone with informed experience, being in the know as to how ward routines operate and so on. But it does not necessarily tell us how these various meanings and references matter to Vincent. However, if we look again at the image, note the cleaner on the left-hand



*Figure 7.5* The view of the ward from the chair.

side, who is presumably working their way gradually through the unit. Now add to this Vincent's description of taking note of each person who enters the ward and where they go. Finally, turn back to his description of waiting in turn to play on the pool table. In each case we have the constitution of a rhythm of activity that punctuates the day, creating its own micro-order that Vincent, from his position in the chair, can pick up and become regulated by.

One of the major issues that came through in every interview (and in many of the studies we have done) is the boredom experienced by service users as they fill out their days on secure with few routine activities across the course of an indeterminate period of detention. What Vincent appears to have done is to find a way of sustaining himself by becoming attached to rhythms of activity that are disclosed to him by occupying a particular position within the ward (see Kanyeredzi et al., 2019). This, we argue, is the sense provided by the data, but arriving at it requires a back and forth between the visual and the discursive and adding in additional reference points from across the corpus.

Sometimes these additional reference points may be so specific to the life space of the person concerned that they render interpretation problematic in their absence. Consider the following image taken by Derek of his bedroom (Figure 7.6).





Figure 7.6 Derek's bedroom.

An initial reading of this image might focus on the relative confinement of the small room, with toiletries and possessions packed tightly into the small table and the bed pushed nearly back against the bathroom door. Or it might begin, instead, with the relative comfort of the well-made bed, which is deliberately foregrounded with the (non-institutional) bed linen carefully arranged. Perhaps it is the juxtaposition of these two aspects of the bedroom that are important? Here is what Derek himself has to say about the image:

*Derek:* I like the pattern on the duvet cover ... all the lines were pointing kind of out towards the window, but there was also like the bars, there were like bars on the – on the – the pattern on the bed sheets and there was – there was, you know, there's linear sort of pattern which kind of mirrored a little bit of what's going on – with the bars and the windows. But it was also like – for me it was also a directional, so it was like beyond what was the bars on the windows.

For Derek, it is the interplay between the repeating pattern on the duvet and the similar vertical arrangement of the bars forming the window which is of interest. What is crucial here is to acknowledge that, since Derek is on a forensic section, he has experience of being incarcerated in the prison estate. The arrangement of bars

is then relevant, as a marker of both where he is now and where he has come from. Although he is now in a hospital setting, he remains detained, and there are markers of that status throughout his bedroom (for example, the table is deliberately installed in the alcove formed by the bathroom to ensure there are no sharp corners which may be used to self-harm, and the windows cannot be opened further than a few centimetres). As the extract progresses, Derek both thematises this detention and also expresses its other side, a 'direction', that is pointed out in a kind of visual metonymy, where the pattern of the duvet cover points towards the bars on the window which in turn point to lines that lead outside the hospital detention.

### **Third mode – The epistemics of the 'unravalled calligram'**

Most textbooks which describe methodological practices for jointly working with different kinds of datasets – i.e. mixed methods – work with the assumption that expanding the range of data gives the analyst 'more' of the world that they are attempting to study. For instance, the idea of 'triangulation' suggests that combining methods provides a mutual crosscheck, where there are several complementary routes to the same overall research objective, whilst notions of 'embedding' one dataset within another turn on the idea that it is possible to clarify or expand on the meaning of one form of data when it is seen through the lens of the other (see Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) . However, as the present study demonstrates, it may well be the case that the relationship between two datasets – here photographs and interview extracts – is not necessarily complementary, but may instead be either ambiguous or, in some cases, actually in tension.

The tension between the visual and the discursive, or the seeable and the sayable, is the central theme of Michel Foucault's essay on René Magritte's painting entitled *This is not a pipe*. Foucault seeks to understand the conceptual operation that Magritte is undertaking in his most well-known work, where a conventional painting of a pipe is accompanied by the words '*ceci n'est pas une pipe*'. This is at once a banal statement: of course this is not a pipe, it is a painting or a depiction of the thing, not the thing itself! But Foucault sees a more elaborate game being played out here. He compares it to a calligram – a form of poetry popularised by Guillaume Apollinaire, amongst others, where the text is arranged to form a picture of the subject of the poem, such as the Eiffel Tower or a horse. In a calligram the seeable and the sayable are combined, but with the odd feature that it is difficult to perceive the image at the same time as reading the text. One has to perform something of a gestalt switch back and forth. Foucault argues that what Magritte does in the painting is to both construct and simultaneous 'unravel' a calligram. The viewer is then invited to consider the relationship between the words and the image. This can take numerous forms. It can be interpreted as 'this image here produced through painterly conventions is not the same kind of thing as what is usually meant when we speak of a "pipe"', or perhaps 'this written statement here does not refer to a particular object known as a "pipe" which can also be depicted as above', or even 'despite the combination of these words and this image, this still does not amount to the idea that comes to mind when you think of a "pipe"'. Finally,

Foucault notes that, in addition to all of this, we have to consider the position of the implied interlocutor who is either demonstrating this lack of equivalence between image and text – i.e. the author of this lesson – or the subject who is being instructed.

The problem that Foucault is raising is that, whilst we tend to think of experience as a holistic blend of multi-modal and discursive aspects, these parts do not fit together cleanly and are continuously joining together and breaking apart in complex ways. To put this in methodological terms, we can say that the relationship between photographs and the words that are said around them involves both similarity and difference, in that whilst they are part of the same experiential world, they also diverge significantly. This also holds at the level of analysis, where what we say about image and text together is juxtaposed with this calligrammatic arrangement of data, and inevitably takes the form of instructing the reader/listener to our preferred way of managing the tensions between these mixed materials. Take the following example in Figure 7.7.

This photograph of a loaf of bread was taken by Lisa, a service user, in one of the small kitchens that are positioned on most wards. Food is a huge issue in secure units (see McGrath et al., submitted). With very rare exceptions, most meals are cooked outside the ward. Service users choose from a limited range of options in advance, and served at a set time. Mealtimes are viewed by staff as a prime site of conflict, and there is an institutional tendency to treat mealtimes as a risky activity



*Figure 7.7* Baking in the kitchen.

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to be managed and completed as quickly as possible, involving as little agency as possible on the part of service users, since choice often results in disagreement and disruption. The purpose of the kitchens is not to prepare routine meals, but rather as a therapeutic space in which service users can engage in cooking as an additional recreational activity. The photograph gave rise to the following comments in the interview, where Lisa describes her favourite thing to bake:

*Lisa:* The honey and ginger cake [ ... ] Because my mum loves that one, so I bake one of them – I do two. But as soon as I do them all, the staff, everybody eats them and –

*Interviewer:* So everybody comes and shares with you.

*Lisa:* Yeah. I just have one bit to see how it tastes because watch the figure and that and then give it all away.

On first reading, this seems to refer to a pleasurable activity. Lisa bakes a cake that reminds her of her mother and makes two at once so that both staff and fellow patients can share in enjoying these freshly prepared treats. Baking in the kitchen would then be a small relief from the daily routines of life in detention, and an opportunity for building relationships within the ward community. However, look again at the image. Notice how the small loaf of bread is framed against the relatively sterile-looking work surface. Something seems to be a little amiss here. If this is taken after a baking session, as the use of the cooling rack under the bread suggests, then why is everything so clean? Where is the mess, the washing up, the left-over ingredients? In fact, it became clear in both this interview and others that such sessions in the kitchen were irregular. Because of the need for close staff supervision, due to the use of sharp objects and other potential risks, the kitchens stood unused for the majority of the time (the only time we saw one unlocked was when one of the team conducted an interview in a kitchen space). There is then something in the image which diverges from the interview.

And if we follow this further, it also becomes apparent that there is a tension with the extract itself. In her second turn, Lisa describes how, despite the link between the recipe and her mother, she does not actually eat much of the cake. She formulates this as because of her need to ‘watch the figure’. This is another complex issue on the ward. Anti-psychotic medication can cause significant weight gain amongst service users, with resulting self-esteem issues. On this particular unit, staff had instituted a ‘healthy eating’ campaign, which appeared to have hit home with some patients (despite the fact that weight gain was often an involuntary side effect). The note of pathos which becomes apparent as we look more closely at the photograph is here reiterated in the paradox of Lisa not being able to fully participate in what might otherwise be a highly meaningful and enjoyable process.

In presentations of the findings of the study, we have sometimes presented images outside of the context of the interviews themselves and have treated them as interpretative puzzles for the audience to reflect on the space of the ward. Consider the following image (Figure 7.8).



Figure 7.8 Corridor on the ward.

This is a photograph of a long corridor which is shot from roughly the centre of the ward where the four spurs meet in a cruciform design. One of the most noticeable aspects of the image is the interplay between light and dark. On the right-hand side sunlight streams in through large windows placed near the ceiling. But further back and central in the image is a locked fire door which provides central access to the ward. The image neatly captures a key tension in the design of the ward. The corridors are large and airy and allow a significant amount of natural light to enter. This is all a deliberate attempt to reduce the carceral appearance of the ward, to make it feel less like a prison. However, the high ceilings also create a highly reverberating acoustic environment, where sounds echo and noises are amplified, especially at night. One of the key sounds is the slamming of the heavy fire door, which is used continuously through day and night. Patients who are resting in their bedrooms – the doors of which are visible up and down the corridor – are then exposed to a considerable degree of unwanted noise, particularly from staff carrying large bundles of key entering and exiting the ward (see Brown et al., 2019a).

This commentary is a little like the process of constructing a calligram. These are words that are wrapped around the photograph, which take on its shape, so to speak. But they are distinct from the image, they are our comments and interpretations rather than features extracted from the image as such. In this mode

of analysis, the photographs do not so much serve as expressions of the experiences of service users, but rather provide a pedagogic opportunity to explore our relationships, as analysts and readers, with the affective dimensions of detainment in this specific environment of the unit. The photograph acts as an 'affective lure' for understanding (to use Whitehead's formulation). It is, however, important to emphasise that, in treating the image in this way, we are departing from a strictly inductive stance on visual research and entering into a more dialogical relationship between analysis and materials.

This raises important issues about how we use visual materials in relation to broader conceptual ideas. We can extend the idea of a calligram to include the weaving together of the theoretical with the empirical. Clearly not all visual research seeks to explicitly deploy theory as part of analysis, but if we are to do so in a way that aspires to nevertheless remain close to the data itself (and by extension, the experiences of participants that are expressed in complex ways within the data), then it is crucial to avoid an interpretative leap where theoretical terms suddenly intervene in the argument and create a hitherto unprecedented level of abstraction. To avoid this, Brown and Reavey have talked elsewhere of treating theory as the 'amplifier' of the data (Brown & Reavey, 2013). What we mean by this is using theory as a way of increasing and elaborating upon an interpretative 'signal' that inductively arises from the empirical materials. Theory is then a part of the process of connecting a situated experience with a broader conceptual account without losing the specificity of the original material. To return to the notion of the calligram, we might say that it involves adding a further discursive layering to the entwined visible and sayable complex of elements.

The last image (Figure 7.9) affords an example of this form of analysis. It begins with a photograph taken by James, a service user with an interest in art. We had hoped that he might explore his interests and tell us a little about some of the art pieces he had made within the interview. However in one publication (Brown et al., 2019b), we decided not to use interview extracts directly, but rather to paraphrase what he had told us and to situate that in a broader story about what we learned about James and how his work was treated within the unit. The long extract which follows constitutes our analysis.

James has been a patient on the ward for some time. He has made a fireplace. Someone gave him some long strips of cardboard and the idea came to him. He painted some of the flames and made the others out of cardboard. The coal is made of screwed up black paper. In fact, this is his second fireplace. The first one looked so good that it was placed on display elsewhere in the hospital. James likes moving the fireplace around. It's difficult, because it is quite wide, but you can move it to different parts of the bedroom. It changes the feel of the place. One of us asks James if the fireplace makes his bedroom feel more homely. He's not having that. Some other people feel it does, he agrees. But me? It just makes me feel like I'm not in a hospital. The fireplace tinctures the bedroom. In fact it tinctures the whole hospital. Everyone seems to know



Figure 7.9 James' fireplace.

about James and his fireplaces – you really need to have a look at what he's done. James does quite a lot of painting and art work. He seems very attached to all his pieces and likes to talk through them all. We imagine him as someone who is retuning the space, changing the feel of the hospital piece by piece. But there seems to be something else going on here. James enjoys talking about the reaction of patients and staff to his work. He thinks very carefully through the colours and the overall scale. The best of his work, he says, has a real 'wow factor'. So the point of his work is not just to retune the space, but also to retune social relations on the unit. The art plugs him into different kinds of relationship with other people. He talks about it as work, as a kind of job that he has here, as opposed to his leisure time, spent in his bedroom, moving his fireplace around.

*(Brown et al., 2019b: 20–21)*

The analysis opens with the story of James' fireplace, which is more or less a direct paraphrasing of interview material (see Tucker et al., 2019 for some of the source material). It then moves to reflect some of the conversations we had as a research team before the interview. We had thought that the fireplace might be an attempt to make his bedroom feel like 'home', something James subsequently rejected in the interview.

The term 'tincturing' is then introduced, a conceptual term derived from the work of Böhme (2017), which refers to the way that qualities of objects drift into the atmosphere of a space. Although this is a theoretical addition, it fits with the story we are progressively unfolding. James' work was a constant presence that was referred to on innumerable occasions by staff and patients during the course of the research. The extract then goes back to paraphrasing comments made by James, but fits them into the conceptual theme of 'tincturing', 'tuning' and 'plugging' into broader social relations. The decision to use a plain prose style and a narrative style rather than juxtapose image and raw interview data then enables this weaving together of the conceptual and the empirical in a way which hopefully avoids the sense of different interpretative levels being in play.

## **Conclusion**

The (re)turn to visual methods in psychology is part of the more general acknowledgement that the multi-modal, embodied nature of knowledge and experience is central to psychological enquiry (see Cromby, 2015; Brown & Reavey, 2015; Stenner, 2018). In this respect it is interesting that ambiguity has been strongly thematised throughout the history of visual research within the discipline. Experience is not easily contained within any given aspect of our life space – it overflows and exceeds boundaries and simple locations. Thus, whilst visual research arguably gives us 'more' of experience to work with, as analysts, it does not give us access to a 'whole'. If experience is characterised by tensions and ambivalences, such as between the seeable and the sayable, then inevitably these tensions will play out in complex and subtle ways and may even be exacerbated within the process of analysis and interpretation. In this respect, we should bear in mind the etymology of the term analysis, which includes 'dissection and dismantling' as well as, originally, 'unravelling' (see Serres, 2008)

The study we have been discussing used photo-production for a variety of practical as well as ethical reasons. As we hope to have demonstrated, the relationship between the photographs and the interview material was not at all straightforward. Like Foucault's 'unravelling calligram', images and texts appeared to challenge and contradict one another. They pointed to fault lines in experience that were as much disruptive as instructive for interpretation. In this sense, as Kanyeredzi et al. (2014) argue, the visual can open fissures in narrative that are ultimately productive in that they force close engagement with the experiences in question (difficult as these may be). The process of working with an 'unravelling calligram' then involves threading in further interpretative resources, including those derived from our particular standpoints as analysts. For example, in the current study, our own embodied experiences of being on the ward were crucial to our capacity to understand what seemed to be slipping between the photographs and the interview material. The aim then is not to imagine how to return to a holistic notion of experience, but to better appreciate the ongoing process of its division.



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## PART II

# Dynamic features

Social media, film and video in  
qualitative research



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# 8

## MENTAL HEALTH APPS, SELF-TRACKING AND THE VISUAL

*Lewis Goodings*

### **Introduction**

The number of mobile applications ('apps') available to download has risen dramatically over the last decade. In the first half of 2019, both Android and Apple platforms estimated that they had approximately two million apps available to download (Statista, 2019). Apps can include tools for everything from managing finances to tracking our health and wellbeing. It is this latter type of app that is of interest to this chapter, specifically apps that provide assistance with mental health issues. These apps include a good mix of visual and textual information, which given the limited size of the screen and the way in which people engage with apps, typically includes a variety of images and visuals. In recognition of the growth of mental health apps (MHapps), the NHS offers an 'apps library' that details information on the apps which have been tested and that have been found to have psychological benefit. MHapps are marketed as having the power to deliver tools for psychological health behaviour change, such as helping with anxiety, supporting a range of phobias, diagnosing depression and general stress reduction. Research suggests that MHapps can improve self-management of emotional wellbeing (Rickard, Arjmand, Bakker, & Seabrook 2016) and increase the autonomy, flexibility and accessibility of accessing mental health support (Leigh & Flatt 2015). MHapps have also been found to increase access to care for vulnerable groups (Bauman & Rivers 2015). MHapps enable people to get a sense of the status of their psychological health and wellbeing by tracking certain information of a psychological nature (such as mood or behavioural indicators of wellbeing). This information is presented in the apps in conjunction with tools for aiding psychological health (e.g. cognitive behavioural therapy techniques or

meditation). Users of the app are then able to examine their own health via the app and track how this information changes over time.

This chapter will focus on the experience of using a health and wellbeing app, with particular interest in the role of the visual and the textual forms of communication therein. The arrival of these apps serves as a good opportunity to recognise the mutual shaping of words and images in our everyday engagement with the world. In a departure from traditional methods in psychology, and in conjunction with the other works in this volume, the visual is treated as an equal party in the communication of meaning and subjectivity in the examining of personal digital data. This aims to recognise how the visual and textual aspects of our digitally mediated everyday practices can provide a platform for understanding ourselves and the world we live in. MHapps include a variety of information on the psychological health of the user which is then visually displayed within the app. The visual representation of this information may vary but can include stylised health images, graphs, tables or icons. Some apps may also display information on collectively available data on one aspect of psychological health and how the individual relates to the collective data, e.g. how their mood scores compare to a 'norm'. Users of the app are literally able to 'see' what their mental health looks like via the graphic displays of the health in the app.

### **Self-tracking in apps**

In order to visually display personal information, apps must first capture, store and review personal digital data. Neff and Nafus (2016) argue that 'a groove has been carved on our collective imagination that makes the close measurement of the body both conceivable and desirable' (p. 20). The apps record and display information that forms an image of the mental health of the user of the app. This act of tracking is not a new phenomenon and one that is commonly linked to the Quantified Self (QS) movement. QS is based on 'self-knowledge through numbers' and is linked to the rise in the number of wearable technologies and other devices that enable collation of information on health and bodily performance (e.g. sleep quality, calorie intake, water consumption, steps taken). Collecting information of a psychological nature (e.g. mood, stress levels) is a further way in which technology can be used to quantify any aspect of everyday life. Self-tracking is a common feature of health apps in general (Maturo, Mori, & Moretti 2016). Lupton (2016, 2017a) argues that we literally come to know how we are feeling through the numbers that appear on the screen: for instance, somebody might look to the information in order to let them know how they are feeling instead of trusting their own feelings. The power of this QS metaphor and of the technology to act as a form of surveillance that eventually governs our behaviour is growing in evidence (Whitson 2013; Williamson 2015). However, Ruckenstein and Pantzar (2015) recognise the need to look beyond the QS metaphor to examine the actual practices of real-life tracking, which are likely to be less transformative than the QS movement suggests, and explore the everyday affectual understandings embedded within self-tracking.

Following a more affective line of inquiry, Lomborg and Frandsen (2016) argue that self-tracking is a 'communicative phenomenon' whereby the act of self-tracking forges a dialogue with the self, the system and a social network of peers. This illustrates how self-tracking extends beyond just the self and incorporates affective meaning from the experience of the way the self is constituted via the app and in relation to social and cultural forms of agency therein. Furthermore, Pink and Fors (2017) argue that 'self-tracking technologies are involved in the complexities and contingencies of wider environmental configurations with humans, rather than simply being technological objects which can be studied for their capacity to generate contingent affects or other qualities with humans' (Pink & Fors 2017: 385). This shows the embeddedness of our experiences within a complex arrangement of humans and technologies, in which self-tracking is part of the digital-embodied way that we experience everyday life. And as Pink and Fors argue, this technology should not be examined in a way that separates out the human and technology in everyday experience, in a similar vein to the central argument of this chapter, in the way that the visual and the textual should be understood as part of a communicative whole through which the apps are lived and experienced.

## **Rize**

This study will focus on the app Rize. Rize is a UK-based app that launched in 2014 and is representative of MHapps in general. Rize includes a number of 'workouts' that are built on a range of psychological techniques that are delivered in self-contained sections of the app. Each workout includes five techniques, including: mood tracking, mindfulness, thinking patterns, behavioural activation and positive mind. Each workout contains activities that specifically relate to each of these techniques, for example, one workout that develops a positive-thinking pattern involves identifying negative thought patterns by looking at some statements (e.g. 'if everyone doesn't like my ideas then the ideas are all useless') and recognising if these statements are types of 'all-or-nothing thinking' or a form of 'disqualifying the positive'. Each user has to look at the options and consider how they would respond to a certain situation. As part of this workout there is a short introduction to the theory behind this activity.

There are also workouts that involve being physically active (e.g. shoulder rolls, ankle rotations). The images below illustrate these workouts. Figure 8.1 shows the 'Rate your mood' screen where users of the app can record their mood before and after taking part in a workout. In this example the mood is set to '8', which means that the graphic is light in nature and displays a positive character. Figure 8.2 shows the 'Deep breathing' workout where users have to hold their finger to the screen and match their breathing with the image as it moves up and down on the screen. The activity in the app in general is then displayed on the home screen which includes information about the number of daily activities completed, average mood and the information collected from within the app workouts. This personal digital data is predominantly visual in orientation. Rize tracks and collates this information

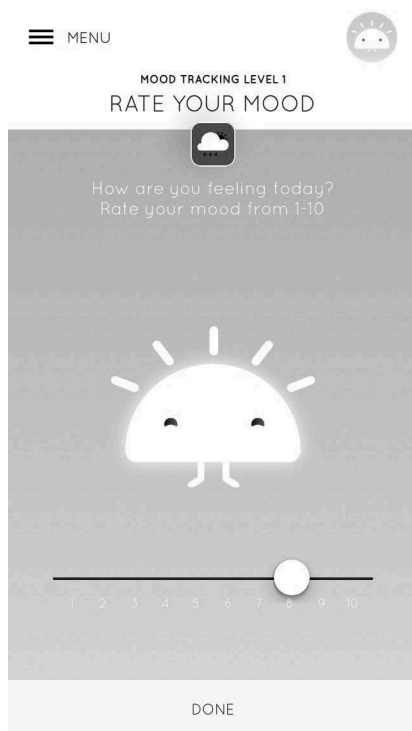
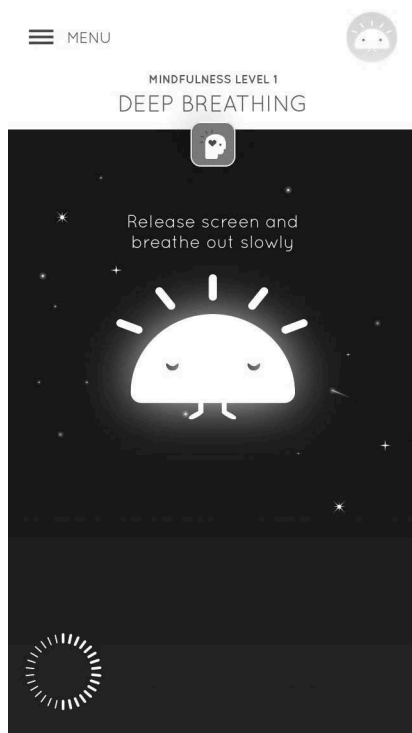


Figure 8.1 'Mood tracking' in Rize.  
(Credit: Rize app, John Harper.)

in order for users to see how their ratings have changed over time. This data is also compiled in a 'symptom tracker' that catalogues this information in terms of diagnosable forms of distress (e.g. depression, anxiety) and users is able to see their psychological health has changed over recent days and weeks, with the app providing a sense of how they might interpret their psychological health.

### **This study**

Verbal data was gathered from October to December 2017 via ten semi-structured interviews. Participants were invited to use Rize for a specific period of time (approximately one week) and then attend a one-to-one interview. The participants were all university students at a UK-based university. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 39 years old (mean = 25) and consisted of three males and seven females. The participants were each encouraged to use the app in a way that felt natural to them and to interact with the activities in a way that they might do ordinarily (which typically included using the app for about 1 hour a day). The



*Figure 8.2* 'Deep breathing' workout.  
(Credit: Rize app, John Harper.)

interviews lasted approximately 40–50 minutes. Standard ethical procedures for qualitative research ensured the protection of the participants (e.g. all participant information was anonymised).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the analysis utilises techniques from thematic decomposition analysis (Reavey et al. 2017). The analysis was achieved by following the stages of analysis described by Stenner (1993) which maps to the following process: the transcripts were read and re-read a number of times for researchers to familiarise themselves with the data; initial codes were then generated by line-by-line coding; these codes were developed into candidate themes; these candidate themes were refined and turned into final themes that are presented in the analysis. This approach is 'inductive' (i.e. driven by the data) whilst also accounting for the theoretical – in this case this related to the literature on MHapps and the body. This means that the data is considered in terms of the actual occasion of the data from the participants, which aims to consider the implicit meanings of the visual in the textual, whilst also attending to the issues arising out of theoretical debates in the area. Each of the final themes was checked



across all of the transcripts and confirmed, ensuring the validity of the themes. The data will be presented in three themes that build on the analytic principles described above. These themes are representative of the interviews as a whole and focus on the role of the textual and the visual in the use of Rize.

## Analysis

### *Synchronising the body and the app*

In the following extracts the participants are talking about their experience of the deep-breathing workout.

#### *Extract 1*

*Adam:* Especially the breathing thing, I would have the app if it, maybe if you are having a panic attack or if you are really nervous about something, or even doing nothing, when I was getting my hair cut and I was waiting, I was just on the app doing some of the exercises, I really like the calm breathing, let's say you are about to do a presentation, a meeting, you know you need to breathe to calm down, you know, cos when you are in that state, breathe in, breathe out, if you bring out the app it makes you interact with it, go up, match your breathing, go down, which is what I like, you are not distracted by anything, having that on your phone is really useful and I think that simple function is really underrated.

#### *Extract 2*

*Emma:* For people that have anxiety attacks, just the regulation of breathing with the visual, plus you are touching it, so there is more than one sense happening, my absolutely favourite was the little cloud, and the way it can help you breathe, I thought that was really clever and very effective

*Interviewer:* you thought someone could hold it down and ...

*Emma:* Certainly, for me as someone who spends too much time *not* engaging purposefully *in the way that I feel*, even though I know it would be beneficial, I'm choosing to avoid and suppress partially, it was a really clever way, a really clever way of just, instead of flicking on to Facebook, just as a habit, just fills gaps of time, the app actually was a constructive way of filling just a few moments of that time, and that it visually changed colour too, that was also good.

In extract 1, Adam comments that he values the ability to regulate his breathing via the app and that this function operates as a way of counteracting a stressful situation, citing a presentation or a meeting as a space where this might be particularly beneficial. Adam states that the deep-breathing exercise 'makes you interact' with the app. It calls forth the body and creates a multi-sensory space that

can be beneficial in a time of crisis. The visual elements of the experience are crucial in this process. In looking at the cloud moving up and down on the screen, the user of the app is invited to engage with their body. In extract 2, Emma further recognises the potential for the deep-breathing workout to be useful in a time of crisis. She cites the visual aspects of the app as part of a multiple sensory engagement with the app. This forges an affective understanding of the body that is felt through the changing state of the body via the app.

The above examples illustrate how the users felt a notable difference as a result of using the app. Although the app is not only useful in a time of crisis, as Emma also discusses the everyday use of the app as a productive space ('the app actually was a constructive way of filling just a few moments of that time'), in which Emma makes reference to other forms of social media that seem wasteful in comparison. In her view, Rize is not about just filling 'gaps of time' but a productive and an affective space. The app provides a space for the body to come into view and Emma feels that the app represents purposeful affective engagement, something which she personally feels she has not devoted enough attention to recently ('even though I know it would be beneficial'). To her, this serves as a way of actively engaging in the way that she feels and not just wasting time via other forms of social media. Emma is able to *see* and *feel* the body moving in the app where the process of interacting with the app allows her to feel the body being re-aligned and transformed through the process of linking with the app. As the user looks at the cloud moving up and down, breathing becomes synchronised with the app, and attention is drawn to the experience of the body changing. This is a sensual experience that is mediated by the visual elements of the app.

Every time the user of Rize accesses the deep-breathing workout this would be recorded by the app as an instance of meditation. This information would be tracked and recorded. Not only do users get a sense of the body through the specific workouts but there is a more ongoing sense of the body that is delivered by the aggregate data from across the app. This would include the frequency of the completion of app workouts in conjunction with other information from the app (e.g. mood ratings). The following section explores the role of the body and the visual in the self-tracking process in Rize.

### ***Self-tracking and affectivity***

In the following extract, the participant talks about the ability to track information in Rize.

#### *Extract 3*

*Adam:* So it is definitely information that *anyone* can use, it is more down to the person themselves, so just by using the app you are *hand-gifted* all this information that you are essentially filling out yourself without knowing really, um, about how to improve your mood, which I guess is the whole this, being mindful, mindfulness and wellbeing, you know as we were saying,

mood during the day, you know, if in the morning, if your mood is always low, you need to be more mindful, be aware, do some more calm breathing exercises then, and then if it is high in the evening then you don't really need to worry much. Looking at a weekly basis, you know, I'm sure Monday will be low for most people, probably the lowest point, the information it gives you is basically reflecting how you really feel, but you are not *aware*, you can then use it to change your lifestyle, especially the most important feature for this was the erm the activities rating, and how much you do them which is telling you, this is what you enjoy, but you don't do it a lot. So then you just think, I should do it more, things that you give one star that you do a lot, you should do this less, the app really, this is what I like about this, the app really gifts it to you. It just tells you, this is what you need to do to feel better.

In extract 3, Adam discusses the accessibility of the information in Rize, stressing that 'anyone' can use it. Adam describes how he routinely looks at the information available via the app in order to get a sense of how he is feeling. Adam explains that if you look at the app and your mood is 'always low' then it is straight-forward to make changes based on this information. He argues that the real benefit of the app is being 'hand-gifted' information with which he can intervene and make changes if he feels necessary. Adam comments on how people are typically 'unaware' of this information and that the app gives people access to information that might otherwise feel difficult to obtain. Adam is able to see information collected from a variety of different locations across the app.

Ruckenstein (2014) finds that information delivered via technology is generally considered a more factual or credible resource when compared to one's own subjective experiences. Extract 3 shows this finding in the way that the app literally tells the user 'this is what you enjoy, but you don't do it a lot'. The credibility of the technology is positioned as a more advanced position to that of the individual's experience. Adam's position on the role of technology is one of revelation as the information that is available on the body is a 'gift'. He discusses this in terms of the activity-rating exercise which is an activity in the app where users are required to select activities from a pre-determined list of things that they enjoy (e.g. 'visiting friends' or 'going to the beach'), giving each of them a star rating in terms of how much they value said activity. The app will then routinely remind the user about how they like to do these things and record each time that they complete one of these activities. Adam states that essentially this tells the user 'this is what you enjoy, but you don't do it a lot'. This exemplifies how self-tracking incorporates a personal digital assemblage of human and non-human bodies, which materialise in such a way that the user of Rize is prompted to see their information in terms of the need to complete a pre-defined set of activities. The app tracks his personal information and visually presents this data in such a way that Adam is reminded to perform certain social activities as a way of meeting what he would have previously defined as a healthy version of himself. Ruckenstein (2014) argues that information

in digital devices confirms a deep-rooted cultural notion that the process of ‘seeing’ makes information reliable and trustworthy.

The relationship between body and technology in the above example resonates with Hansen’s (2006) conceptualisation of the ‘digital image’ in which the role of the body is positioned as an essential function in the way that we ‘enframe’ digital information. As Adam receives a notification to say that he has a low activity-rating score then this causes him to feel his body in a different way, perhaps as ‘disconnected’ or a ‘socially distant’ body, which feels somewhat out of line or in need of resolution. For Hansen, when the body senses a need for change or as being somehow incomplete this results in *affectivity*. Looking at the information in Rize, and making changes based on the available information, results in an affective response. Adam is able to feel the body as a result of the change of movement. This illustrates the complex entanglement of human–non human assemblages through which we come to understand ourselves. For Hansen (2006) the body is continually being ‘recreated anew’ in the process of filtering digital information. Digital information provides an opportunity to appraise the body in relation to a collective image of the body, and to make changes that will connect the body with the information on the body. This echoes Adam’s comments in terms of the finality of what a person needs to do to ‘feel better’, emphasising a set of activities that will ultimately lead to feelings of self-restoration. However, what is perhaps missing from his account is reference to this practice as an ongoing process, one that is unlikely to ever be finished. Regardless, in the process of filtering information from the app, Adam acts back into the app in order to create a new image of the body, one that is fitting with the information therein. This produces an affective experience that is part of the way we know the body. The unfolding sense of these attempts at modifying the body produces an affectual understanding of the body in motion. Adam is able to see and feel his body by engaging with the activities in the app and making changes that impact on how the body feels. Here, being able to ‘see’ the data is vital in this process.

### ***Seeing ourselves in apps***

#### *Extract 4*

*Daisy:* I think it is a useful tool because I have used other apps that are meditation-based and have a lot of that tracking system, ‘this is your day five’, and so you see how you have progressed, if you’ve gone up, if you’ve gone down, what can you do to get back up again, you try and keep yourself on a positive trajectory, and I think it’s good to look back to see what things have made you upset and then avoid those things in the future.

Daisy speaks about the act of trying to keep on a ‘positive trajectory’ by keeping in regular contact with the app. This can include trying to avoid those things that have had a negative impact in the past. This example illustrates not only how we gain an affective understanding of the body via the attempts at modifying the body,

but that this process also stretches into the future as well. The affective trajectory of the body in the app is felt in terms of future potential movement as the user knows that the body will change again and again in response to the ever-changing amount of personal digital data.

Early extracts in this chapter demonstrate how the body can enter into practices of bodily modification via the app that provides affectively charged spaces for feeling. The current extract further demonstrates how these practices are impacted by the relational connection between the body and the technology, and the entangled nature of human affordances and technological affordances. Daisy describes the ongoing need to consider one's own sense of the future in conjunction with the technological affordances of the app. Lupton (2019) argues that apps generate a 'range of relational connections, affective forces and agential capacities, responding to and working with the affordances of the technologies and the fleshy affordances of human bodies' (2019: 136). The ability to feel the body changing is essential in the agential capabilities of the app and a positive experience for the participants. However, extract 4 shows how seeing and feeling the body in this way is reliant on a body in motion. The image of the body in the app is one that continuously changes in response to the complex assemblage of relation in the app. As result, we need to accept that even when we have the body 'how we like it', it may change at any moment. So much so that the body in the app needs regular surveillance. That is, there is also a more unexpected set of activities that relate to the non-human affordance enacted by the app, which means that the user needs to stay in constant contact with the app in order to maintain these feelings of control. In the above example, Daisy comments on the need to keep in regular contact with the app in order to keep her body on a 'positive trajectory'. Pink and Fors (2017) argue that digital materiality is a process in which experience is a joint production of the digital and the material, emphasising the *emergent* properties of the network of relations. These spaces are always changing and there is a sense of a multitude of bodies that also inhabit these digital spaces. For Daisy, data will continue to change and transform so it needs to be regularly checked and monitored.

MHapps provide a unique vantage point to identify those areas that have had an impact on our health. As Daisy states, you can 'look back to see what things have made you upset'. In making these distinctions, Daisy is not distanced from or separate to this information. This ties with Barad's (2003) conceptualisation of agency as being linked to our being in the world, where people are able to make observations and claims about their lives, not because they are somehow natural in this process, but because they are embedded in it (see also Lupton 2016). This is *lively* data that is constantly changing and where the ability to see oneself via this technology is reliant on continual contact. Barad (2007) also argues that our experiences of the body are entangled in a variety of human and non-human relations, such that are commonly taken to be uniquely human (e.g. feelings, thought etc.) and actually need to be conceptualised as products of the relationships that are *between* bodies and techniques. This can be further supported by findings in relation to the use of other social media technologies where disconnection from the

technology was repeatedly associated with feelings of fragility and instability (see Tucker & Goodings 2017).

In the above extract we can see how the act of using Rize has resulted in an affective connection with the app through which the user is able to see herself and where the user is keen to keep her digital body on a 'positive trajectory'. Presumably, in order to achieve this digital future there is the need to keep engaging with the activities both inside and outside of the app. In essence, we can see the varied way the data can 'come to matter' (Lupton 2017b) in apps like Rize. Notably, none of the participants in this study showed intentions to resist, change or 're-embody' (Gardner & Jenkins, 2016) the way the app visualises their psychological health.

### **Concluding comments**

MHapps visualise personal health information in a way that people can track their changes over time. The act of processing embodied digital data is now a regular feature of contemporary life and the nature of digital technologies brings together both human and non-human bodies. Being able to visualise personal data in Rize does not allow for an alternative or 'second self' to be crafted in this app (as has been documented in other digital technologies): instead, human and non-human bodies are entangled in the way we come to know personal information. As Lupton (2017c) argues, the digital-material manifestations of these personal data assemblages encourage users to 'feel their data'. This recognises the way that this information is felt through our bodies, not in terms of some abstracted information on a screen, but as data that invoke embodied affective responses. Being able to interact with health information is a regular feature in a digital world and this chapter has sought to justify the importance of the visual and of visual practices in the process of feeling digital data.

The chapter focused on the experience of self-tracking in one particular MHapp – Rize. In this app users are able to see and feel their personal health information in action, and take part in psychologically inspired activities that impact on this information. The analysis illustrates how the early stages of the app work to synchronise the body with the app – a process in which the user is able to feel changes to the body by engaging with activities in the app (particularly shown in this example where the users turn to Rize in moments of crisis). As a result of an embodied engagement with the app, users come to know themselves through the visual representations of the body in the app and start to feel their bodies changing. This identifies the mutual shaping of body and technology, where the app changes in response to body modifications and vice versa. What is pivotal to this affective connection with the app is the ability to feel the body in motion. The participants in this study related positively to the experience of the body changing in response to the information in the app.

The role of the visual in these digital sense-making practices should not be underestimated. Digital technologies communicate in ways that prioritise visual forms of communication, to the extent that some forms of social media are almost exclusively

visual (e.g. Instagram). These technologies offer a good opportunity to see the mixing of different elements, of words and images, as providing the basis of our experience. Through materialisation and interaction, these words and images become ways of seeing and feeling. Digital technologies such as MHapps provide a specific way of encountering words and images in terms of our personal health information. The body then responds to, and acts into, this informational flow in order to make sense of these bodies. Future approaches should look to find further examples of where people are trying to make sense of their personal data in light of the human and non-human entanglements, perhaps where the body is *shut down* or *restricted* from moving in a particular direction. This would build on this study where the attempts to move, or be moved by, the technology were met positively by the end user. This would shed further light on how the body 'feels' as a result of alternative personal digital data materialisations.

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## 9

# THE VISUAL IN PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND CHILD WITNESS PRACTICE

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This chapter explores the role of the visual in legal practice and psychological research, focusing on issues of children's memory and testimony in the context of child abuse investigations. Reporting experiences and findings from a research project that compared child witness practice in England/Wales and Germany (Motzkau, 2007a), the chapter illustrates how the visual asserted itself throughout the research process, emerging as an important and often equivocal arbiter within practices negotiating children's memory and credibility. It is outlined how the effect of the visual ambiguously shapes children's experience of giving evidence and the conditions under which the credibility of their statements is assessed. The chapter focuses in particular on the role of video technology introduced in the UK, as part of special measures to provide better access to justice for children and vulnerable witnesses. Drawing on courtroom observations and data from interviews with legal professionals the chapter illustrates how in practice the video asserted itself as a participant, an autonomous proxy witness with a gaze and an ambiguous voice of its own. Finally it is noted how the traditional ocularcentrism of western societies (Hendy, 2013), i.e. a tendency to value visual information over that received by other senses, can distract from the importance particularly of the audible and listening in this context (Motzkau & Lee, forthcoming).

The chapter underlines the importance of considering visual alongside textual data; it highlights the need to reflect about the direction and efficacy of the gaze as mediated through visual technologies; it points to the problem of invisible spaces produced as a result of the use of visual data; discusses how the visual raises questions about the integrity of the data and researchers' own integrity; and examines the way time influences how data is collected, interpreted and viewed. In the context of the analysis, the chapter reveals a constant slippage between what is visible and what can be said about the visible, a disjunction between seeing and speaking (Deleuze, 1986). This in turn hints at the key role of listening (Nancy,

2007) for research in psychology and vis-à-vis the visual. It is suggested that the work of Deleuze (1986) about Foucault could play an important role in consolidating the theoretical framework of visual research in psychology.

## **Introduction**

Children have traditionally held a problematic position as witnesses in courts of law, historically facing a deeply rooted mistrust about the reliability of their memory, and their capability to comply with the laws of evidence (Spencer & Flin, 1993; Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Motzkau, 2010). Still, as a result of growing awareness of child sexual abuse since the 1970s, courts across Europe and Northern America began to amend the law, enabling children to be admitted as witnesses more frequently. Yet, following a number of high-profile miscarriages of justice that hinged on children's evidence (Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Bull, 1998), there was renewed wariness about the reliability of children's testimony. Psychological research has helped to better understand children's testimony, generally affirming children's ability to give reliable accounts (cf. Goodman & Clarke-Steward, 1991). Yet, research also cast further doubt on children's reliability, variously highlighting their vulnerability to suggestion and their potential problems understanding and conforming to the requirements of legal procedure and the laws of evidence (Ceci et al., 1994; Goodman et al., 2017; see also Motzkau, 2007, 2009).

Since the early 1990s legislators in England and Wales have introduced and continued to improve a range of special measures and protocols designed to protect child witnesses by accommodating their perceived needs (e.g. the police video records witness interviews so they can be played later on in court) (HRM Ministry of Justice *Achieving best Evidence*, 2011), while at the same time ensuring the admissibility of their evidence in court (Motzkau, 2007; Westcott, 2008; La Rooy et al., 2016). This positive effort stands in contrast to the fact that conviction rates for cases of rape and sexual abuse in England and Wales have dropped from 32 per cent in 1977 to a continuous low of around 6 per cent in 2005/2006 (Kelly et al., 2005; Feist et al., 2007). Additionally researchers in the field have long pointed to persisting problems with the prosecution of rape and child sexual abuse (Plotnikoff & Woolfson, 2004; Westcott, 2006). Indeed, more recent reports about the performance of justice (HMIC, 2015) and welfare services (Smith et al., 2015) point to continuing and serious problems with the prosecution and detection of abuse and sexual exploitation of children. The Office of The Children's Commissioner (2015) estimates that in England between April 2012 and March 2014, of an estimated 400.000–450.000 victims, only 50.000 were known to statutory agencies (that is one in eight); and prosecution and conviction rates remain low. Importantly, these reports indicate that it remains unclear why decades of practice reform, guided by research and 'serious case reviews' (Munro, 2011), have not resulted in significant improvements. 'Understanding why evidence based, well thought through procedures and guidance do not result in good practice is a conundrum which requires further thought' (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), 2015, p. 75; see also Laming, 2009, p. 7<sup>1</sup>). In the meantime, in 2015 the government declared child abuse a national priority

on a par with terrorism, underlining the perceived urgency of the problem (gov.uk, March 2015).

It is against this backdrop that I conducted a research project that compared child witness practice in England/Wales and Germany, looking particularly at cases of alleged sexual abuse and the impact of psychological research and expertise on legal practice (Motzkau, 2007a). The empirical part of the project combined an ethnography (Latour, 1987) of English-Welsh and German legal practice with the analysis of data collected in semi-structured interviews. In both countries I observed criminal trials including child witnesses, attended police interview training and psychological expert practice, and conducted interviews with a total of 35 researchers and practitioners (police officers, judges, barristers, social workers, psychological experts and researchers). One of the main objectives was to examine what constituted the concrete conditions of children's credibility in each country's practice. It focused particularly on the special measures put in place to see how practitioners dealt with the problem of giving children a voice in legal proceedings while remaining wary about their reliability as witnesses and their ability to comply with the legal 'call to truth'.

Methodologically the project was situated within a critical qualitative framework combining tools related to discourse and conversation analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), with an analytic approach following what Parker termed 'critical discursive research' (Parker, 1992), to inform the analysis of the historical and socio-political context of child witness research and practice.

At the outset the project had no specific focus on the visual, nor was there a plan to employ visual methods or analysis. However, early on during data collection, and particularly in relation to the special measures implemented in England and Wales since the 1990s, and continuously improved since (Davies et al., 2016), the visual emerged as a distinct feature, posing a number of perplexing questions. For example, while attending a police training course, where officers learn how to conduct video-recorded interviews with children and vulnerable witnesses, I was surprised by the amount of time spent by officers discussing, and worrying about, the impact and nature of what could be *seen* on the video, and how this 'visibility' could variously affect what could/should be said by the interviewer and the child. I had expected officers to focus much more on what is *said* during interviews, as this is what the rules of evidence and the training guidelines are concerned with (e.g. explaining questioning techniques, conversational rapport and how to avoid suggestion).

Officers' preoccupation with the visible is interesting because witness interviewing or the reliability of an account would usually be associated with conversational issues, i.e. the quality of the questions asked, or the consistency and quality of detail provided in the witness statement. Throughout my data collection however it became clear that the visible played a distinct, and often ambiguous, role for the way children experienced giving their evidence, and for the way their credibility was viewed; a role that could not be subsumed under, or grasped via, the textual or spoken aspect of the practice. Hereby special measures also highlighted an unexpected disjunction between evidence/testimony as 'spoken', and the nature of what the visual would add to this evidence and the perception of its reliability.

In the following I will briefly sketch the role of the visual in legal practice, outlining how some of the questions raised resonate with visual research. I will then return to the findings of my research and give a detailed example of the efficacy of video technology as a measure to improve child witness practice.

## **2 Child witnesses and the visual in legal practice**

Legal practice and qualitative research in psychology have very different agendas. Still, legal practice is a site where complex institutional, societal and psychological discourses come into play while concrete questions of experience, memory and truth are negotiated with real-life consequences for those involved. Hence the law can be seen to operate as an epistemological practice that encounters and deals with specific methodological problems of evidence and experience, some of which resonate in an interesting way with issues faced by researchers using visual methods in psychology. It is interesting to look at the visual in contemporary legal practice because the English/Welsh legal system has been undergoing a 'turn to the visual' not unlike the one seen in qualitative research in psychology. Legal practice thereby encounters and illustrates some of the issues the visual raises.

In the past the visual has often played a rather problematic role for legal practice, as it invokes a 'naïve empiricism' reflected in the widely held assumption that visual media render objective accounts and thus provide a 'visual truth', as Banks (2001) highlights: 'Euro-American society has constructed photography – and in due course, video tape – as a transparent medium, one that unequivocally renders a visual truth' (p. 42). Banks (2001) points to Mirzoeff's analysis of CCTV footage used in the case of James Bulger (the grainy footage shows James Bulger being led away from a shopping mall by two young boys).<sup>1</sup> Mirzoeff (1999) emphasises the symbolic value this footage acquired as proof of the defendants' guilt despite the fact that it did not actually show any of the acts of violence they were convicted of.

Another example of the problematic role of the visual in law is the use of images in expert testimony. Research demonstrated that the presentation of random fMRI images alongside meaningless or circular statements about brain functioning dramatically increased the likelihood that participants considered the statements to be relevant and valid, rather than recognising them as meaningless and rejecting them (which the majority did in the absence of fMRI images) (Scolnic Weisberg, 2008). These issues resonate with a recent critique by Buckingham (2009), who reviews creative visual methods in media research, highlighting that the apparent immediacy of the visual means that it is often taken too literally, introducing a 'naïve empiricism' into research. This could be the result of the desire to appeal to what Daston and Galison (2007) termed 'mechanical objectivity' (common in the modern natural sciences), i.e. an attempt to capture the nature of something with as little human intervention as possible, thus creating an apparently superior, scientific, form of evidence.

In this context, attempts at visualising children's evidence highlight a particularly disconcerting analogy between assumptions about the benefits of creative visual methods held in legal and research practice. Guided by the assumption that

children are less able to speak, or indeed less reliable in their speaking (which, as outlined earlier, has a long tradition in legal practice), it was at some point thought they might find it easier to provide evidence about traumatic experiences through drawings. A similar sentiment is expressed in visual research, when researchers highlight the potential of the visual to provide a voice for those who are often not heard when speaking, or are less literate and capable of expressing themselves in language, e.g. children (Frith et al., 2005; Reavey & Johnson, 2008). While this is a valid point, it inevitably also carries and perpetuates the negative implication of visual accounts being just as 'immature', 'irrational' and 'inferior' in their expression as those who are seen to benefit from using them, i.e. they are 'childish' types of expression (Lynn & Lea, 2005; Burman, 2008). In this sense they might not just inadvertently devalue children's accounts, but in turn also perpetuate the implicit sense that children indeed cannot speak and/or are not worth listening to (Buckingham, 2009).

This is reflected in the tragic history of such methods in legal practice where they were used for children who were suspected victims of sexual abuse. During the mid and late 1980s when awareness of child sexual abuse increased (Haaken, 1998) and more children were heard as court witnesses, there was a widespread assumption that particularly children struggled to speak about traumatic experiences such as sexual victimisation. In this context the idea emerged that one could access children's potentially repressed memories, unavailable to language, by interpreting children's drawings (existing ones, or drawings children were encouraged to create). This method was considered a valid means of diagnosing sexual abuse in children who were suspected victims but had not disclosed (or actively denied anything had happened). Painting and drawing are used routinely in therapy, and undoubtedly many children (and adults) find these activities helpful in the process of working through or disclosing traumatic experiences. However, the coercive and unprofessional way in which such techniques were used in investigative contexts in the late 1980s and early 1990s was highly problematic. Motivated by good intentions but driven by an exaggerated assumption of the epidemic proportions of sexual abuse, investigations were based on biased interpretations that vastly overestimated the sexual implications of drawings, contributing to a number of high-profile miscarriages of justice, with tragic consequences for families and children involved (cf Bull, 1998; Steller, 2000). (For a broader discussion of the use of visual devices for detecting sexual abuse, see also Wakefield & Underwager, 2006.)

Within a research context visual methods are often considered to offer a richer, 'more powerful way of capturing emotions associated with it [the image] that can be far removed from verbal articulation' (Gillies et al., 2005, p. 201), thus grasping more 'fully' or deeply our embodied experiences, potentially giving participants the opportunity to 'speak to the often un-speakable', as Reavey and Johnson (2008, p. 311) put it. While these are valid points, the over-generalised way in which children's drawings were sometimes interpreted for investigations in the late 1980s is a striking reminder that the uncritical assumption of a direct link between an inner 'un-speakable experiential truth' and a drawing can have rather problematic implications. The example highlights that visual researchers need to remain wary

about lapsing into naïve empiricism or pandering to ‘mechanical objectivity’ (Daston & Galison, 2007). We should remain sceptical about suggestions that visual methods could in and of themselves empower research subjects by apparently overcoming ‘the rationalistic or logocentric tendencies of verbal approaches, [ ... ] [allowing] subjects of research to express their views more directly, and with less interference or contamination’ (Buckingham, 2009, p. 633), or by seemingly providing more authentic accounts of an embodied ‘inner self’. Still, looking at this example around children’s drawings, it is also clear that the problem rests not so much with the image, or the visual itself; the problem rests with the institutional and societal discourses driving the interpretative operations that establish a specific alignment between what can be said and what can be seen (in this case taking various features of drawings to be expressions of traumatic experiences).

Firstly, this underlines that the discursive as well as the prevalent cultures of listening (Motzkau & Lee, forthcoming) play a crucial role alongside the visual, and thus must not be neglected in analysis if naïve empiricism is to be avoided. Secondly, the way the drawings operate in legal practice also exemplifies the disjunction between the visible and the spoken. The drawings as such, before their meaning is linked into the dominant concern for sexual abuse, can invoke multiple interpretations; hence the visible entertains no definite relationship to what can be said about it. This disjunction causes what is often referred to as the polysemic nature of the visual (Gillies et al., 2005). I will trace this further in the next section, when looking at my research findings and examining special measures and child witness practice in England and Wales in more detail.

## **2 Video technology in child witness practice in England and Wales**

The special measures introduced in England/Wales since the 1990s for children, vulnerable and intimidated witnesses (see for example Criminal Justice Act, 1991; Home Office, 1991; Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act, 1999; Home Office, 1999; Ministry of Justice, 2011) include the video recording of testimony given to the police, which can later be played in court as evidence; cross-examination of a witness via CCTV link from outside the courtroom; removing lawyers’ wigs and gowns or using screens to hide the witness from the defendant. Additionally, special guidelines and training have been introduced for police officers conducting witness interviews (Motzkau, 2007; Westcott, 2008). Most of these special measures engineer changes to the visual field of the courtroom. They mediate absences and presences, and manipulate visual immediacy in a way that is designed to preserve the rights of the accused, thus guaranteeing a fair trial, while at the same time facilitating children’s testimony by reducing the potential for them to feel intimidated or confused. It is hoped that this will provide conditions under which children are more likely to provide accurate and detailed accounts, thus creating circumstances under which they can give better, less ambiguous, evidence and that allow the jury to assess their credibility more objectively.

The CCTV link for example mediates visual and textual presences across space. During cross-examination, rather than being in the courtroom, the child will be in a small CCTV room, sitting directly in front of a television screen, with a video camera focused on their face. For the child this means that the court personnel (defence barrister, prosecutor and judge) are replaced by the television screen the child is looking at, where their faces will appear or vanish depending on who is addressing the child. In turn the measure allows for the child to be absent from the courtroom, by transmitting the child's televised image on to a television screen in the courtroom. So in a sense the television screen takes the child's physical place in the witness box, as a proxy witness that is perceived as less ambiguous by the court and the jury, because it is hoped the child is affected less by what goes on in the courtroom.

Throughout my research however it emerged that the way in which the CCTV link mediated children's experience of giving evidence did not have a straightforwardly protective effect. Practitioners reported that child witnesses have been known to get very distressed about the fact that the video link will expose them to the gaze of an unknown and (to them) invisible group of strangers (in the courtroom). This was particularly unsettling because it meant the defendant would be able to see them on screen, while they were unable to look back at the defendant. This illustrates that, even when mediated, the effect of the gaze, present or assumed, is always reciprocal, it goes both ways. Being 'on display' while not being able to reciprocate the gaze can cause anxiety and feelings of loss of control (see also Lee, 2001). This underlines ethical issues with visual data researchers need to bear in mind, as similar problems could emerge in relation to video-recorded data and images. Participants may not always feel free to raise this as an issue, or may only much later realise the idea of an unknown group of people being able to view their data is upsetting to them.

A further concern I encountered throughout my research is related to the way this practice mediates the perception of children's credibility. Practitioners and researchers worried that the 'televised' image of the child is too indirect, too remote ('antiseptic'), not allowing the jury to experience the physical presence of the witness, meaning the jury would be less likely to find the child's account credible. For example, a judge commented that in his experience many surprising acquittals could be related to the use of CCTV. He suspected that children's credibility is undermined by CCTV links, because most people are 'anodised'<sup>2</sup> against empathising with a witness over CCTV link, because they are used to seeing terrible things on television. Contrary to this, legal practitioners also mentioned the concern that mediating children's presence via a CCTV link could emphasise children's vulnerability. This, it was feared, would appeal to jurors' general desire to protect them, in turn encouraging jurors to subsume the defendant's dangerousness and thus guilt. In summary, following one interpretation the CCTV link underlines children's credibility, as it is seen to highlight their preciousness and vulnerability as victims; while following the other interpretation, the televised image undermines children's credibility, because it is seen to deprive the jury of immediately experiencing children's physical presence, introducing

a distance that, as practitioners suspect, makes it difficult to resonate with the child's distress and to sense their sincerity.

These examples illustrate that the CCTV link can constitute a rather unreliable proxy witness; one that, rather than transparently and disinterestedly mediating the witness account, adds problematic effects to the witnesses' experience, while also generating an ambiguous voice of its own that is added to the expression of the witnesses' evidence in court. Just as in the previous example relating to children's drawings, we can see that there is a friction, a disjunction, between what is said (testimony) and what is seen (screened image). And where court practice previously only had the live statement of the child, the introduction of a visual mediation invokes an equivocal, polysemic set of readings and effects that resonate in contradictory ways with different assumptions about how presences and absences support or discredit the credibility of children's testimony.

In my research this was even more evident in the use of video-recorded evidence. Following this measure the police will video record the investigative interview they conduct with the child, and in case of a trial this video will be played in court as the child's 'evidence in chief'.<sup>3</sup> Similar to the CCTV link, this video poses as a proxy witness on the child's behalf, but the video does not just mediate the child's image/presence and statement across space, but also across time. It preserves their image and statement at the initial interview and transports it to the time of the trial, in a sense allowing the two time zones to overlap. This is meant to ensure that children's account is collected as early as possible, before they forget information, and to preserve it on tape, making sure it does not alter or is contaminated in the meantime (the time between reporting and trial can be in excess of 10 months). So by recording the video the officers aim to create a stable forensic exhibit that can be stored and later presented in court, directly transmitting the account from one time zone into another, while also displaying the evidence more predictably than the child would do in person. In Motzkau (2007) I have analysed the problems resulting from this practice in more detail. To illustrate the ambiguous role of the visual as it emerged in this research, I would like to revisit the three main themes of that analysis, and examine them with a focus on the visual and the disjuncture between the visible and the spoken. The three themes are *total visibility*, *integrity* and *time*.

## **2 Video and total visibility**

Traditionally police officers would have interviewed a child witness, recording their statement literally or paraphrasing it in writing for the file. Hence the trail of evidence would have been entirely textual, leading up to further testimony given (and cross-examined) verbally in court. With the introduction of video-recorded evidence a sense of total visibility, of complete, unadulterated footage, has now been introduced to the trail of evidence, and thereby to the work of the police officers. As I have argued earlier the visual, in this case a video recording, is considered more reliable evidence and more objective as it appeals to the modern scientific idea of 'mechanical objectivity' (Daston & Galison, 2007), implying what



is transmitted presents itself without any human intervention, and thus is unadulterated. But by offering an extremely detailed visual account of the interview itself, the video also highlights the relative lack of visibility everywhere else in the process. This heightens the sensitivity and demand for transparency and accountability. This is for example reflected in a section of the police's interviewing guidelines ('Achieving Best Evidence') that instruct officers to accompany a child out of the interview room to the toilet to make sure they do not speak to anybody during comfort breaks (Home Office, 2007; see also HRM Ministry of Justice Achieving best Evidence, 2011 for a more recent version of the guidelines which are being updated again in 2019/20). This instruction became the centre of an intense discussion at a police training course I attended.<sup>4</sup>

### Excerpt 1

- 
- 1 TO: [ ... ] but why do we do it? It's this issue about whether they've been what? (.)  
 2 conducted cajoled (1) threatened that's the issue (.) ((PO1: hmmm)) if they'd been  
 3 conducted (.) cajoled (.) or threatened it's likely to be by (.) the person that we've  
 4 brought with them as their witness supporter (.) ((PO1: hmmm)) another family  
 5 member who happens to be at the police station (.) or a police officer (.) ((PO1:  
 6 yea)) ok (.) which can happen at any time (.) it can happen before they arri::ve at  
 7 the p'lice station (.) as they arrive at the p'lice station after they le:ave the p'lice  
 8 station (.) s::o (.) y'know I find that (.) the fact that they say that you gonna do this  
 9 and that (.) but I find that (3) a little bit a bit a bit you know (1) it it it's a::lmost  
 10 like saying like you are (.) hhhfff taking this person into custody [ ... ]  
 11 PO2: if the tape's running whilst they go to the toilet (2) you're gonna be seen on the  
 12 tape anyway (1)  
 13 TO: you're gonna be seen?  
 14 (1)  
 15 PO2: if the tape's still running (.) while they nip out to the toilet (.) ((TO: yea)) you stay  
 16 in the interview room (.) (TO: yea) you're gonna be shown (.) on there anyway  
 17 TO: you're gonna be seen?  
 18 (1)  
 19 PO2: you're gonna ruin the rapport  
 20 (1)  
 21 TO: you're gonna ruin the rapport? by going to the toilet with them?=  
 22 PO2: Yeah I think so it's quite intimidatin'  
 23 TO: I think it's potential to offend them
- 

The training officer criticises this requirement and notes that it is almost 'like you are (.) hhhfff taking this person into custody' (lines 9–10). He also points out that this requirement exclusively focuses on, and thus highlights, potential misconduct by the police and during the interview. Yet, if a witness was 'conducted, cajoled or threatened' (1–2), the training officer underlines, this could not just happen during an interview break, but it could 'happen at any time (.) it can happen before they arri::ve at the p'lice station (.) as they arrive at the p'lice

station after they leave the p'lice station' (5–7). Still, as we can see, with the introduction of video interviewing the attention is firmly focused on the interview, casting doubt on those activities that are occurring alongside the interview but are now 'visibly off camera'. The further discussion then reflects the officers' confusion as to whether the video is a neutral witness on their behalf, confirming their good conduct as they are 'seen on the tape' (14–16) doing nothing untoward; or whether the video is actually a surveillance device eyeing the officers' activities suspiciously. The latter is expressed poignantly at the end of this discussion, where one officer added resignedly, and to the other officers' bemusement, that 'next thing an' we'll have cameras in the toilets' (Pol2: 863–866). They thereby illustrate the effect of an idea of total visibility as implied by the video, because ultimately this would imply that only seeing/recording everything that goes on would really suffice. The officer's remark is likely to have been made in jest, as this kind of total surveillance seems unrealistic. Still, the way in which the video suggests the need for 'total visibility', and the problems this brings, is interesting to consider for visual researchers, who might find themselves in a similar position, implicitly creating and then having to account for the invisible spaces emerging alongside their data.

## **2 Video and integrity**

Looking at excerpt 2, a passage from the same discussion quoted above, we can see that officers come to the conclusion that what is at stake here is their own integrity as police officers. So regardless of their training officer's critique of the guidelines, the officers see it as paramount to follow this requirement to the letter, as it is the only way they can preserve their own integrity. And this is considered crucial, despite the fact that accompanying a child witness to the toilet might frighten the child, thus ruining the rapport and consequently undermining the collection of reliable and detailed evidence (excerpt 1, 18–23).

### **Excerpt 2<sup>5</sup>**

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- 1 PO1: but effectively your integrity is supposed to be intact isn't it because if anybody  
2 else=  
3 TO: why? cause you'r a policeofficer?=  
4 PO1: yes absolutely  
5 (2.5)  
6 TO: yea ok I I'm you know (1) it's horses its its what the the the=  
7 PO1: I think you can stand up in court and answer all the questions that they're asking  
8 you and you'll say no they weren't interfered with no this didn't happen that  
9 didn't happen ((TO: yes)) [umm]  
10 TO: [all the time] they were with me  
11 PO1: yes  
12 TO: I can say that nothing untoward occurred=  
13 PO1: your honour
-

Preserving their own integrity, the officers find, will also protect that of the interview and thus support the credibility of children's evidence. This also means that if necessary they can later on stand up in court to again assert that integrity. We can see how, via the video, children's credibility is directly tied to the officers' integrity, which in turn is challenged by the video's presence. So paradoxically, the video is not a reliable witness on behalf of officers' integrity, but it is the video that, by extending visibility, first introduces the ambiguity that makes integrity a specific issue. Before the introduction of video recording, the textual practice of recording evidence was organised around the principle that police officers were reliable recorders of evidence by virtue of being police officers, by virtue of being part of the investigative legal machinery. And while, at times, there may have been doubt about the integrity of their practices, it was not expected for them to routinely display and assert their integrity in relation to practices of recording evidence. But as soon as the video allows us to see what they are doing, their routine performance becomes a central matter of concern, exposing it to multiple interpretations, while fostering a demand for even more transparency. Hence officers now have to actively and routinely produce their integrity, and potentially affirm it again by performing it verbally in court, as the exchange in lines 6–12 (excerpt 2) illustrates in an almost stage-like fashion.

Again we can see that the visible, here illustrated through the use of video, is not a mere addition to the spoken, it is not just an additional channel that doubles and confirms what is being said. On the contrary, it seems notoriously ill aligned with what is said, it opens up a space for multiple interpretations and adds ambiguity that now needs to be tackled.

Visual researchers face a very similar problem. This example highlights that researchers' integrity, the integrity of the data, and the way in which the analysis aligns what is visible with what is said about the data, needs to be considered with great care. Ultimately this reminds us that what people make of what they see, and what is audible in speaking, i.e. what can speak in listening (Barthes, 1985), requires much more careful theorisation in future (Motzkau & Lee, forthcoming).

## ***2 Video and time***

The example of video-recorded evidence illustrates further problems emerging around the fact that the officers are operating in one time zone (the interview) but as a result of video mediation are expected to simultaneously perform in another, future, time zone (that of the trial, where the video will be viewed). Further excerpts from the training course show that officers are aware that certain aspects of their interview, which at the time of conducting the interview would be considered as supporting the credibility of a child's statement (e.g. a challenge may be needed to clarify a point in the child's account), might have the opposite effect later, when the video is seen in the courtroom. Here a jury might take an officer challenging a child witness to mean that the officer thought the child was lying, thus 'implanting a seed' (excerpt 3, line 5) of doubt in the jury members' minds.

**Excerpt 3**

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- 1 TO: Is it so urgent to challenge a witness's evidence at that point in time?=  
2 PO1: well it could be that's the thing couldn't it [...]]  
3 TO: ( ... ) if it is one interview that is played before the court we've already particularly if  
4 the jury get to see that aspect of it we have already ahm (.) we're implanting a seed in  
5 their mind that we actually don't believe it [...] which is ammunition for the defence.
- 

This illustrates that the video's future efficacy is difficult to control, even for those who plan and record it. The officers have to fear it might perform as an unpredictable, potentially fanciful proxy witness, later on presenting the child's account in a different, potentially unfavourable light. Further, this example illustrates how the gaze of the video cameras, trained on the interviewing officers, is also channelling the unpredictable gaze of a potential future jury back in time, into the interview room, where it injects uncertainty into the officers' planning and conducting of the interview. It thereby undermines the officers' confidence which in turn can be detrimental to the quality of the evidence the child is able to give.

In legal practice it is assumed that officers should conduct the interviews following the guidelines ('Achieving Best Evidence'), without concerning themselves with issues surrounding the potential later impact of the evidence, but my research showed that the way this practice is set up makes it difficult for officers to evade the gaze and efficacy of the video technology once it is in place. We could see that much of police officers' concern, and consequently effort, was directed at tackling the multiple interpretations that threaten to emerge from the video, while it remained impossible to anticipate how what is visible on the video, will be seen later on, as what is visible seems to stand in no fixed relationship to the statements made on it. In Motzkau and Clinch (2017) I provide a more detailed analysis of the paradoxes police officers face when interviewing children, and finding themselves facing what I termed voids (Motzkau, 2011), or liminal hotspots (Stenner, 2017).

It is interesting to consider how these problems resonate with the process of planning and recording data for visual research. Clearly, as researchers we are also exposed to the (anticipated) gaze of our potential future audience (which might include research participants). This gaze is cast back in time on to the process of data collection and analysis. Furthermore, by displaying videos or images collected during research, we are creating an overlap of time zones similar to the one police officers produce. In doing this we potentially face similar ambiguity in the way our data is perceived by viewers, for whom it might open up further interpretations, or for whom it might even refuse to support our own analysis (see also Ashmore et al., 2004). In this context, the specific problems raised by the visual and enduring nature of the video as it operates across time and space highlight once more the peculiar phenomenon facing visual research in particular: the disjuncture between the visible and the articulable.

This is further illustrated in the account of a prosecutor I interviewed, who outlines how helpful the police's video recordings are for assessing whether to prosecute or drop a case. The prosecutor said the video helped to see what the witnesses are like and thus how they will come across to the jury. She outlined that some children might look somewhat shifty and would thus be perceived to be less credible. The prosecutor's account highlights that, while children's verbal account is important, the video has introduced a new emphasis on the visible elements of the evidence for assessing credibility. The prosecutor illustrates this by giving the example of a case where the credibility of a very young child, a girl whose statement might have been difficult to bring to court due to her young age, was effectively bolstered by her doll-like appearance, and the way her 'innocence shone through on the video'. Yet, the prosecutor mitigates this account by adding that children might look shifty, less doll-like or uncomfortable, not because they are lying, but simply because being interviewed by police about traumatic experiences is as such awkward and uncomfortable. However, by adding this comment, the prosecutor implies that visible shiftiness could not just be an indicator of an untrue statement, but it could also be considered as visible proof of a true statement, in the same way as 'radiating innocence' is, thereby re-introducing the ambiguity her example about the doll-like witness had initially eliminated (for a detailed analysis see Motzkau, 2010). This example shows once more how the visible proves polysemic, ambiguous, and appears disparate from what is said. This is another reminder that we need to attend to and better understand the visual cultures and cultures of listening (Motzkau & Lee, forthcoming) such imagery and statements will feed into.

## ***2 The visible and the articulable in research and legal practice***

Child abuse investigations are always delicate and complex, and with this analysis I do not wish to imply that the use of video technology is generally detrimental. The introduction of special measures is clearly a positive move and there are many cases where the use of video technology has helped to facilitate prosecution and to achieve just convictions. This is why my research seeks to help support their effective application. In this spirit the examples discussed here are meant to create awareness for the efficacy of the visual, and the potential ambiguity added to this practice as a result of the constant slippage between the visible and the articulable. It is this disjunction between seeing and speaking that creates the impression the video was an autonomous proxy witness with a gaze and a voice of its own. This phenomenon is corroborated by visual researchers who point to the polysemic nature of visual data that makes it difficult to pin down or agree on interpretations. Gillies et al. (2005) describe this as the experience of a constant slippage of interpretations as they tried to negotiate the meanings of images they had created themselves in the context of a research project. Temple and McVittie (2005) report a similar experience when describing the unexpected autonomy visual objects and images, created during therapy, gained during the therapeutic process, invoking complex investments and ambiguous relationships with clients, that could not easily

be controlled or resolved. It is variously suggested that such issues could be approached by adopting a thoroughly reflexive position in research (Lynn & Lea, 2005; Reavey & Johnson, 2008; Buckingham, 2009). While this is a valid point, researchers remain vague as to what exactly such a reflexive position entails. In this context further examination of the theoretical and practical framework of visual research is needed.

I would suggest that it is one of the most important contributions of visual psychologies to expose the issue of the disjunction between speaking and seeing, and to make it available to systematic analysis. Still, a clearer theoretical framework is needed to support the exploration of research that examines diverse modes of data within and beyond discourse (see also Motzkau, forthcoming). In this spirit I would like to offer a brief theoretical outlook, pointing to theoretical resources that could prove useful to the development of a reflexive and critical version of visual psychologies.

## **2 Visual psychologies: a theoretical outlook**

Deleuze (1986) finds the question of the relationship between the visible and the articulable to be at the heart of Foucault's exploration of formations of knowledge and his analytic distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive. According to Deleuze, Foucault based this distinction on the fundamental finding that 'There is a disjunction between speaking and seeing, between the visible and the articulable: "what we see never lies in what we say", and vice versa' (Deleuze, 1986, p. 64). Here Foucault does not insist on a primacy of speaking, but upholds the specificity of seeing, of the visible, asserting that neither speaking nor seeing is reducible to another. Crucially, as Deleuze outlines, Foucault marks these as two distinct ontological formations, i.e. forms of 'there is', a light being and a language being. This in turn means, according to Deleuze, that there is no principle, law or pattern that determines their relationship, as their relation is essentially a non-relation. Deleuze illustrates this strange type of phenomenology by drawing on Foucault's commentary on Magritte's famous painting of a pipe presented above the written words 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' ('this is not a pipe'). According to Deleuze, Foucault points to the

'little thin band, colourless and neutral', separating the drawing of the pipe from the statement 'this is a pipe' to the point where the statement becomes 'this is *not* a pipe', since neither the drawing nor the statement, nor the 'this' as an apparently common form is a pipe: 'the drawing of the pipe and the text that ought to name it cannot find a place to meet, either on the black canvas or above it.' It is a non-relation.

*(Deleuze, 1986, p. 62)*

This assertion of the autonomy of the visible resonates with the apparent unwieldiness of the visual and its evasiveness to interpretive capture observed in my own research about child witness practice, as well as in other examples of visual

research mentioned above (Gillies et al., 2005; Temple & McVittie, 2005). Foucault has been accused of ocularcentrism himself, for the dominant position the visual seems to be given in his work, but more recent analysis has shown that the role of the ear and the audible in his work has been overlooked (Siisiäinen, 2013). Exploring the visible vis-à-vis listening and the audible, and developing such theoretical resources could provide a better grasp of what this non-relationship, and the resulting interpretive slippage between the visible and the articulable, means for visual psychologies (Motzkau & Lee, forthcoming; Motzkau, forthcoming). This would contribute to research that exploits the benefits of visual methodologies alongside textual modes of analysis while avoiding the pitfalls of naïve empiricism, or a dominance of the visual over the audible or the textual.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has illustrated that, where children become witnesses their memory, testimony and the perception of their credibility are intimately linked to the workings of visual technologies. These have a significant effect on intensifying or multiplying visibilities or channelling the impact and direction of children's and spectators' gazes. In this sense my research underlines the value of developing distinctly visual psychologies that employ visual methods and explore the role of the visual for core psychological questions such as memory, credibility, agency and subjectivity. Yet, it also emphasised that we must not neglect the discursive textual and audible modes of data and analysis. These need to be employed alongside visual methodologies, as the articulable forms an entity distinct from the visual. The disjuncture between the visual and the articulable raises intriguing theoretical and practical questions of the analytic value of which needs to be explored further.

The chapter illustrated that, even though research and legal practice differ dramatically in their agenda and the potential consequences for those involved, legal practice as an epistemological and social practice offers an intriguing backdrop for reflecting about visual methods in research. This backdrop provided evocative reminders that we should be sceptical about claims that visual data could provide absolute "experiential immediacy", or could by default offer participants an empowered voice. It highlights that we need to reflect critically about the direction and efficacy of the gaze mediated through visual technologies (in relation to participants, ourselves as researchers and our audience); that we should be aware of the invisible spaces visual data produces; that we must be alert to the specific ways in which the visual raises questions of integrity and time; and that we must not forget about the relationship of the visible with other modes of perception and sense making.

## **Notes**

- 1 In 1993, 2-year-old James Bulger was abducted and later murdered by two 10-year-old boys.
- 2 Interview with judge2: 588–628. All data quoted in this chapter was collected by the author in 2004/2005 for Motzkau (2007a).

- 3 'Evidence in chief' is the initial evidence given by a witness under the guidance of the lawyer who called them. It forms the basis of the subsequent cross-examination which, for children and other vulnerable witnesses, will be conducted via CCTV.
- 4 Data set – Pol2: 720–866. 'TO' = training officer and 'PO' = participating police officers. The excerpts were edited with omissions indicated by square brackets '[ ... ]', but the overall character of the exchanges is not altered. The transcript notations used are a simplified version of Jefferson (1984): pauses appear in rounded brackets indicating seconds: '(1)' or less '(.)'; speaker emphasis: 'underlining'; overlapping turns: '[square brackets]'; minimal acknowledgement tokens by other speakers: '((double rounded brackets)'); words drawn out: 'col:ons'; a turn interrupted by a take up of another speaker: equals sign '='; rising intonation: question mark '?'.
- 5 Data set – Pol2: 720–866.

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# 10

## THE VIDEO-CAMERA AS A CULTURAL OBJECT

### The presence of (an)other

*Michael Forrester*

#### **Introduction**

The emergence and rising significance of qualitative methods in psychology are coterminous with the introduction and advancement of recording technologies (both audio and visual, and analogue and digital). It is likely that part of the reason for this is the apparently less interpretative nature of technologically reproducible ‘factual’ documents, that is in comparison to earlier methods such as diary studies and ethnographic field notes. Across the discipline there are many examples which exhibit that close and particular integration of theoretical development, methodological innovation, data collection practices and the associated conventions of interpretation, all coalescing around the record – the documentary evidence produced by audio and video techniques and technologies (Ochs, 1979; Zuengler et al., 1998). Observational methods in developmental psychology and discursive approaches found in social psychology are two example domains difficult to imagine developing in the way they have without the corresponding availability of recording devices and techniques. The aim in what follows is to consider, and place into context, video-recording as a research practice in what is often described as a naturalistic or an ‘everyday’ setting, particularly when one of the participants also has the dual role of researcher/participant. The focus is on understanding something of how participants orient towards, accommodate or otherwise respond to the video-camera as a cultural object, particularly when it is used regularly in an everyday context (family mealtime recordings).

In order to locate the focus of the material reported in this chapter, something should be said regarding the background to these opening comments. Having carried out experimental/laboratory research in the late 1980s and 1990s into the development of young children’s conversational skills (Forrester, 1988, 1992), the costs, constraints and challenges presented by developing and extending this particular line of research within a laboratory context seemed out of proportion to the insights that might be gleaned from the results. In contrast, the opportunity

afforded by being able to study in detail, over a long period of time, one particular child as she was learning how to talk appeared more fruitful given the insights that can emerge from the longitudinal single-case study. In developmental psychology there is a long history of studies, informing work in such areas as language acquisition and the development of musicality (Brown, 1958; Papousek and Papousek, 1981).

The research that forms the background to the extracts discussed in this chapter employed a single-case longitudinal design, so as to examine the developing conversational skills of one child during an important period of language development during pre-school years, from 12 to 41 months. This child was my youngest daughter Ella, aged one year at the time I began the study, and I was very fortunate in my immediate family giving their permission, and agreeing to participate in this extended piece of research. At the outset the aim of the work sought to understand what is involved in a child learning how to talk and thus become a member of a particular culture. A second objective of the work was to describe in detail the socialisation processes whereby the child learns, and begins to produce, discourses relevant to successful participation in the context he/she inhabits (certain aspects of this work have been documented elsewhere; Forrester, 2002, 2008).

The question of what constitutes the 'natural' or the 'real' in psychology and other social sciences has a long and distinguished history. The discipline, especially in those sub-topics and areas with a close methodological allegiance to the hypothetic-deductive framework(s) of natural science, has a particular suspicion of theoretical over-interpretation and speculation, and going beyond the facts or record (James, 1890; Cooper et al., 2008). This is not the place to enter into a discussion regarding the epistemological or pre-theoretic presuppositions and assumptions underlying different theoretical frameworks in psychology. Many others have done so with considerably more insight than what might be accomplished here (see Edwards, 1997; Burr, 2003). Instead my aim is simply to raise some questions or concerns regarding the procedures and practices we bring into play when we set out to video-record the 'normal', the 'natural' or the spontaneously 'real' when studying human interaction.

Some time ago Hall (2000) drew attention to the fact that social scientists seem peculiarly reticent to consider in detail their own 'activities of collecting, watching, or interpreting video as a stable source of "data" for research and presentation purposes' (p. 647). Hall (2000) outlines four observations relevant to the collection of video records, suggesting that video-recordings:

- (a) reorganise the tasks and experiences of research participants,
- (b) serve different research interests by selectively attending to different aspects of human activity,
- (c) reinforce or break open traditional boundaries between researchers and their study participants, and
- (d) provide both limited and privileged access to aspects of human interaction.

In what follows I would like to refer to these comments when considering extract examples taken from the corpus described earlier, and specifically, moments when the target child displays an orientation to the video-camera as an object.

There are a number of reasons why such examples provide us with opportunities for re-considering or at least articulating pre-conceived ideas we may have regarding video-recording, especially video-recordings of everyday normal or natural interaction. Notice, the focus is not necessarily on the child and how she may/might have gradually become aware of the camera, subsequently learning how to 'perform' for it; the original work was solely directed at documenting the child's emerging conversational skills. Further, the question is not one of the veridicality of the 'record' as a record of the true or 'real'. Nor is it a secondary analysis of the processes one might initiate in order to best ensure that interactions being recorded are as natural as they could be, whatever that might mean, if the camera had not been present. Instead by simply substituting 'video-camera' for 'video-recording', Hall's (2000) comments can serve as an entry point into the analysis and discussion of examples.

### **Methodological approach**

Before turning to the extract examples, something needs to be said regarding the methodological approach adopted here, best described as ethnomethodologically informed conversation analysis (CA). The analytic approach adopted for the initial analysis is ethnomethodologically informed, in that (a) the selection consisted of events where there was evidence in the sequence of the interaction itself that participants displayed some orientation to the event as noticeable for some reason, and (b) detailed extracts employing the conversation analytic approach were produced so as to highlight certain aspects of the interactional sequences. This approach is particularly concerned with an examination of the fine detail of talk-in-interaction, close attention being paid to the unfolding sequence of talk using a transcription orthography that serves to highlight fine-grained aspects of what is going on (Appendix 1, Table A10.1).

CA originally emerged as a specific method aligned with an approach in sociology known as ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodologists focus on people's own ideas and understandings about whatever it is they are doing, and it is these understandings which guide the analytic enterprise. Ethnomethodology has been described as 'the study of the common, everyday, naturally occurring, mundane methods that are used by people to produce and manage the common, everyday activities of the everyday social world' (Livingston, 1987: 10). Ethnomethodology involves a rational analysis of the structures, procedures and strategies that people themselves use when they are making, and making sense of, their everyday world.

CA itself aims to show how meanings and representations in discourse are produced through the structures, procedures and practices of talk. Conversation analysts have been principally concerned with classifying and describing the structures and general procedures employed by people in understanding and taking part in conversations (Psathas, 1995; Hutchby and Woofit, 2008). These include turn-taking, closing conversations, introducing topics, asking questions, making requests and other related features of talk. It is important to recognise that the question of whether or not people perform naturally or not whenever a camera is recording their behaviour is of no particular theoretical or methodological concern to the ethnomethodological perspective. Instead ethnomethodology/CA is simply

concerned with understanding the methodic sense-making reflexive social practices people engage in and produce within *any* social context (Garfinkel, 1964; Livingston, 1987).

### **Data extract examples**

The extract examples considered here come from a series of video-recordings (31) of the author's daughter, Ella. This child was filmed during mealtimes as she was interacting with her father, mother and/or older sibling, Eva (aged 8 at the beginning of the recordings), and for the most part was positioned in a high-chair in view of the camera (as in Quay, 2008). The recordings of the target child were collected from age 1 year to 3 years 5 months. The length of the recordings range from 10 to 45 minutes (average 35) with the total recording amounting to around 11 hours. Following completion of the recordings, transcriptions using conversation analytic conventions were produced (following Psathas, 1995). Additional transcription notations relevant for child language analysis were also produced (McWhinney, 2000) and the resulting data corpus can be viewed through the web-data feature of the CLAN software (CHILDES, 2008).

The available data corpus was examined in detail and all examples where participants showed some explicit or implicit participant-oriented interest in the camera were noted for further analysis. Across the full detail set the number of instances was 15 in total, all relatively brief (as in the extracts below). Given that there are around 12 hours of recorded material transcribed and documented one might surmise that, for these participants, in this context, the video-camera was not necessarily of particular interest or note. We can turn first to the earliest example where the principal participant, that is the target child in the research project, explicitly referred to the video-camera.

#### **Extract 1: Child age 1 year 5 months**

##### ***Context***

The child is sitting in a high-chair, eating, and the father has only recently switched the camera on. This is the ninth recording in the sequence of 31. During this brief extract the mother enters the room. The video-camera is a small portable digital camera on a tripod in a corner of the room (kitchen).

##### ***Summary exposition of extract***

In this extract we find one of the first examples where the child explicitly refers to or notices the camera. From the outset there are also indications that the child's father displays an orientation to the fact of being video-recorded for research purposes. The mother makes an explicit comment about the video and a brief discussion around this takes place between the adult participants.

**Extract 1**

Child age 1 year 5 months

- 
- 1      *FAT:*      I kn↑ow Mummy's singing a s↑on↓g  
2                    (0.4)
- 3      *FAT:*      is she↑ ((spoken as he walks past child))  
4                    (1.6)
- 5      *FAT:*      ↑singing a ↑so::ng to us? ((child looking in opposite direction))  
6                    (2.2) ((during pause sits down))
- 7      *FAT:*      ((coughs)) ((looks towards/beyond the camera))  
8                    (3.0)
- 9      *ELL:*      ((turns towards father and looks towards camera during turn))
- 10     *MOT:*      [xxx xxx]xxx [xxxx] ((M singing))
- 11     *FAT:*      [sniff]  
12                    (5.3) ((father adopts 'frozen' gesture))
- 13     *MOT:*      °it's nearly half xxxx°  
14                    (0.1)
- 15     *FAT:*      alright darlin=  
16     *MOT:*      =coffee first actually ((child looking at camera))  
17                    (0.9)
- 18     *ELL:*      d[a !] ((E points to the camera))
- 19     *MOT:*      [exx clement↑] ((spoken while entering room))  
20                    (0.2)
- 21     *MOT:*      ↑ooh are you videoing?  
22                    (0.3)
- 23     *FAT:*      ye↓ah ((body posture still 'frozen'))  
24                    (2.5) ((father slight smile at mother))
- 25     *MOT:*      °m° bleur:: ↓ ((towards child who puts finger far into her mouth))  
26                    (0.2)
- 27     *FAT:*      hhh  
28                    (0.4)
- 29     *MOT:*      °m° bleur::  
30                    (0.6)
- 31     *MOT:*      that's why you're so calm and relaxed darling isn't it?  
32                    (0.3)
- 33     *FAT:*      ((smiles glumly and looks at camera))
- 34     *MOT:*      hhh  
35                    (0.5)
- 36     *FAT:*      ((looks towards mother with quick smile))  
37                    (3.0) ((child looks towards father))
- 38     *FAT:*      I kn↓ow ↑I do feel calm and relaxed  
39                    (0.6)
- 40     *FAT:*      don't I googlin(g) it ((family pet name for child))  
41                    (0.6) ((moves away from table))
- 42     *MOT:*      hhh ↓hou::se Daddy hou::se=  
43     *FAT:*      = ↑kno: ↓w
-

The extract begins not long after the video-camera has again been set up and switched on. As the father is moving around the room he comments to Ella that her mother (in the next room) is singing and then, at line 6, sits down near the child in view of the camera. Between lines 6 and 13, while the child is eating, and not always looking towards her father, he appears to adopt a somewhat curious posture (around line 12), saying nothing and doing little, that is apart from looking past the child and 'side-on' to the camera.

At this point, line 13, in the adjoining room, the mother quietly comments about the time, which, for these particular participants, presupposes a series of actions regarding what is going to happen next (the mother leaving the child in the care of the father, and going off to prepare for the day). This is indicated in his reply; however as he stops speaking she comments that (before continuing) she will make some coffee.

Our attention is drawn to the next short sequence, from lines 17 to around 24, for a number of reasons. First, the child herself turns towards, looks at and simultaneously points towards the camera and produces an utterance (line 18). Notice she does this precisely at the point her mother is entering the room and, as far as one can tell from the video, the mother is not aware of or looking at the video-camera. Second, the mother indicates surprise at the fact that the camera is on (line 19). Heritage (1998) and others have documented the significance of the 'oh' comment or response in conversation, indicative of an addressee recognising or understanding something that was not immediately apparent. Third, neither the mother nor the father replies to the child or appears to notice that she has pointed at the camera. Fourth, we can note that between, and through, lines 23–25, the father, although maintaining the body posture mentioned earlier, does two things: (a) he replies with a minimal 'yeah', spoken with a noticeable downward intonation, and (b) looks towards the mother and then produces a slight ambiguous smile. We might ask, who is this smile for, and what might it indicate? The father, occupying a somewhat ambiguous role as both participant and as researcher is concerned with recording the natural and normal everyday behaviour of the child (and her family), and yet it would appear, keenly aware of a potential 'sometime-in-the-future' audience presupposed by the very fact of the production of the record and the collection of data.

Continuing with the analysis, the mother makes a comment (line 25) precisely at the point where Ella places her finger in her mouth while still eating her banana. At line 29 she repeats this phrase, while still looking at the child, and then, displays a specific orientation to the fact that the father appears to be having difficulty in 'doing being natural' while the camera is on (line 31) by producing an ironic comment. His response is noteworthy and may be indicative of precisely the question or rather challenge surrounding the 'capturing' of natural, spontaneous, everyday family behaviour. He produces a curiously 'glum' smile, looks very briefly towards the camera, and noticeably, as he does so, his hand on the back of his chair, falls or rather 'drips'. Sustaining a performance of 'doing being ordinary', as



Sacks (1992) has pointed out, always involves effort, and in this instance it is the somewhat stilted and unnatural nature of his attempts at ordinariness that are being explicitly referred to. Explicit reference to such a ‘performance’ has undermined the very attempt at naturalness.

The final section of this extract again provides us with some indications of the complex role of the camera, or rather, the recording of natural behaviour for academic/research purposes, particularly where the researcher is also a participant in the interaction. In response to the suggestion that he is not ‘calm or relaxed’ and thus accountably not ‘doing being natural’, his response is instead to treat the ironic comment in curiously ‘literal’ terms and, through doing so, transforms the topic or trajectory of the conversation along lines of an agreement. However, it may be worth noting that immediately after saying this, he then (a) acts as if he is addressing the child – using a pet family name for her – and (b) moves to leave the table. One interpretation of this might be the taking of a position such as; ‘no, look, I’m just going to carry on and act as if everything is fine and normal’. The mother then changes the topic of the conversation.

Taking into account Hall’s (2000) comments above, the events described here certainly accord with the suggestion that the presence of the video-camera re-organises the tasks and experiences of research participants. Here, the father’s task re-organised into one of ‘being the adult participant’ in the task of collecting research data. But notice, this ‘re-organisation’ is subtly embedded in the fabric of the sequence of the interaction. This also draws our attention to the notion of the camera as involved in the breaking of traditional boundaries – raising the question of, in this case, the position of the father as ‘insider participant’ in the research, including the analysis of the data.

Moving on, and turning to a second extract, recorded when the child was 15 months older, we have an instance where her recognition of, and orientation to, the video-camera is both more marked and possibly more complex than in the first.

## **Extract 2: Child age 2 years 8 months**

### ***Context***

The context is the same as the above; however this is the 23rd recording in the series. During this brief extract the father leaves the room briefly and then returns.

### ***Summary exposition of extract***

In this short extract the child, on finding herself alone for a brief moment at the kitchen/breakfast table, looks towards, non-verbally addresses and performs ‘for’ the camera.

## Extract 2

Child age 2 years 8 months

---

1	FAT:	look there's a big hu::ge bit
2		(1.8)
3	FAT:	you can't eat ↓that↑
4		(0.4)
5	ELL:	yea::eaoh ((hands on head – sticks tongue out when speaking))
6		(3.1)
7	ELL:	oh
8		(3.4)
9	FAT:	mmhhmm
10		(2.1)
11	ELL:	>I can eat<
12		(0.4)
13	ELL:	a::lll by myself
14		(0.1)
15	FAT:	a::wh >that's pretty good↓< ((turns and makes to leave table))
16		(0.5)
17	ELL:	ye::h all by myself ((as she finishes speaking father leaves room))
18		(1.6)
19	ELL:	when daddy wasn't coming here I'd be a:::ll al::: ↓one↑
20		(1.0) ((during line 19 looks at camera then at toy monkey))
21	ELL:	((during pause holds hands and looks down))
22	FAT:	well daddy be back in minute ((voice heard from adjoining room))
23		(12.2) ((see text for detail on activity))
24	FAT:	I am back
25		(11.6) ((both participants resume eating and eating/reading))
26	ELL:	this tri::angle shape and look
27		(0.9)

---

The earlier extract highlighted how an adult-participant researcher attempts to deal with the challenges and ambiguities surrounding recording 'normal' interaction in an everyday context. In this second extract we are provided with some indication of how the youngest participant orients towards the camera as a significant object, doing so in a manner that presupposes her recognition of its 'presence' or rather something/someone who is 'present'.

The first part of the extract (lines 1–14) involves the father and child discussing the toast she is eating, how this toast is quite large, and her positioning herself as somebody who can nonetheless manage to eat it. We might notice the manner in which, after her father has suggested she couldn't possibly eat all the toast (line 3),

she emphasises how she (alone) will manage to eat it by herself by stretching the sound she makes when saying 'all' in line 13.

What happens next draws our attention to how this child orients towards the presence of the camera in a situation where she suddenly finds herself in the room on her own – a situation she marks quite explicitly as something undesirable or negative. Around line 15, the father replies to her assertion that she can indeed eat all her toast by herself, by speaking quickly in a positive tone, and yet simultaneously getting up from the table and walking into an adjoining room. At this point (line 17), Ella produces a receipt of his statement, commenting that, yes indeed, she will eat all the toast herself. However, as she finishes speaking he has already got up from the table, and as he leaves the room she produces the extended utterance at line 19. As she is doing so, at the point where she says 'here', she turns and looks directly at a soft toy (her pet monkey) which is placed opposite her on the table.

Leaving aside the child's mistaken use of 'coming/gone', the utterance itself is interesting as there may be a curious 'slippage' or association between the positive – assertive – use of 'all' which she has just said in line 17 (with some emphasis) and the long-stretched-out plaintive use of 'all' in line 19. The switching from positive to negative or at least from assertiveness to 'sad' or problematic is marked in the particular manner in which, as she speaks, she draws her hand together, and looks downwards (Figure 10.1a). Immediately after she is saying/doing this 'performance' we hear the father (line 22) responding to her comment from an adjoining room and displaying an orientation to what she is saying (notice his use of 'well' and mirroring of 'daddy').

We then observe, during the pause in the extract at line 23, a very specific and marked orientation towards the camera by the child which warrants our attention. After the father stops speaking (line 22), she raises her head, and after approximately 3 seconds, looks up and towards the camera (Figure 10.1b) (and not at her favourite toy). Following another short pause (2 seconds) Ella then begins to 'interact' with or perform for, the camera (Figure 10.1c). She begins to sway, move and dance in her chair, adopting a pursed smile while continuously looking towards the camera. She does this (Figure 10.1c–e) for the remaining 5 or 6 seconds until the father returns to the room to sit beside her once again.

At the very least her response presupposes her recognition of something/someone watching. We can ask, and again with reference to camera presence re-organising the tasks or experience of participants, how are we to understand the nature of the child's smile – who is it for and why is it expressed in the manner it is? Certainly there are grounds for suggesting that she displays an awareness of 'being watched'. There is however, and again with regard to earlier comments on video-recordings and privileged access to hitherto unrecorded aspects of human interaction, the question of whether and in what way this momentary interplay between child and camera is potentially somehow private or confidential. A psychoanalytically informed interpretation of the child's response in this instance might draw our attention to children's use of the 'smile' or fixed grin when



*Figure 10.1* Video-recording accompanying extract 2. (a) Ella draws her hands together, and look downwards; (b) Ella raises her head and after a short delay looks up and towards the camera; (c) Ella ‘interacts’ with the camera; (d) and (e) Ella sways, moves, dances in a chair while looking at the camera.

encountering danger or feeling anxiety. It is difficult to ascertain whether the child appears to draw on the presence of the camera as a resource to assuage her ‘being alone’ or, in contrast, whether it is the camera itself which initiates her use of a smile as a defensive gesture.

The ethical and moral dimensions underpinning research conducted with researchers' own children are not necessarily realised in legislative parameters outlined by bodies such as the British Psychological Society or the Economic and Social Research Council. In other words, the protocols and guidelines regarding what is deemed both acceptable and appropriate will reflect the prevailing cultural conventions regarding children's rights. What might be seen as entirely appropriate in a UK context would not necessarily be acceptable in a Norwegian (Solberg, 1996) or Danish (Qvortrup, 1993) research context. Certainly the recognition that a researcher cannot second-guess any potential future use of research data in an unanticipated manner is often glossed over in established ethical guidelines (King, 2010).

In the next short extract, recorded when the child was a few months older, we find a more clear-cut case of the camera being oriented to as 'something that watches' or records. Here, and in addition to the indications that Ella may view the camera as someone/an entity that can be communicated with and/or appealed to when seeking solace, we have an instance where the camera is viewed with suspicion and/or negatively.

### Extract 3: Child age 2 years 11 months

#### *Context*

The father has prepared breakfast for the child and is busy in the kitchen – awaiting her eventual completion in order that they can go to work/nursery. The child is playing with her toys at the breakfast table and does not appear to want to eat her breakfast.

#### *Summary exposition of extract*

The child looks towards the camera while engaging in a behaviour which is generally prohibited in this context (using a pacifier/dummy instead of eating food), and before her parent has recognised that she is engaging in such behaviour.

#### **Extract 3**

Child age 2 years 11 months

---

- |   |             |  |
|---|-------------|--|
| 1 | <i>ELL:</i> | °xx xxx so°                            |
| 2 |             | (1.2)                                  |
| 3 | <i>FAT:</i> | have you ↑tried your porridge ↓now     |
| 4 |             | (2.3)                                  |
| 5 | <i>FAT:</i> | has it cooled down for [you?]          |
| 6 | <i>ELL:</i> | [↑I'm] only cutting this kiwi fruit up |
| 7 |             | (.) and [I'll] eat it                  |
| 8 | <i>FAT:</i> | [alright]                              |

(Continued)

Extract 3 (Cont.)

9		(1.9) ((child cuts toy fruit and one part flies off))
10	ELL:	eh but ↑I like my <u>fruit</u> be::: ↑es[t]
11	FAT:	[you] do don't you
12		(3.5) ((sound of father starting toaster))
13	ELL:	°I miss my xxx° (.) xxx xxxx xxxxx
14		(17.9) ((puts dummy in mouth and looks at the camera))
15	ELL:	mmhhmmmm
16		(7.1)
17	ELL:	°mmmmhhmm°=
18	FAT:	=↑a:::W >come on darling< don't put your [pubs in]
19	ELL:	[I wann com xxx I'm gonna <u>wait</u> ] °for it° =
20	FAT:	=well it <u>is</u> cooled down now darling you're not eating i::: ↑t
21		(0.2)
22	FAT:	>d'you want me< to take it away then?
23		(0.9)
24	FAT:	cause you're not eating any and you've not even tried it and you put
25		your pubs back in
26		(3.7)

Around line 3 we hear the father asking Ella whether she has tried her food, and on not receiving a reply then asks whether in fact it has cooled down now. Indications of upcoming disagreement between the participants may be apparent at line 6, when the child both interrupts/overlaps her father's second question, and in doing so uses the qualification 'only' when offering an explanation why she has not yet started eating. This account is accepted as reasonable by the father (line 8). The child however, again after a pause, then makes the suggestion that (rather than eating porridge) she 'likes her fruit' best, doing so with a stress and emphasis on the latter parts of her utterance. The father (who is talking from another part of the room) then simply agrees with what she has said, and it remains ambiguous whether there is any engagement on his part with the ongoing topic (the disagreement over what is being eaten/or instead played with).

What then happens next again provides us with evidence regarding the status of the camera as a cultural object for this participant. About 3–4 seconds after the end of the quiet utterance in line 13, she looks quickly towards the porridge, then towards her 'dummy' (this/these have the pet name 'pubs' in this family), and putting her head on her hand/arm on the table reaches for her 'pub' and puts it into her mouth (Figure 10.2a). Then, after a 5-second pause, she first reaches for a second dummy on the table, and after lifting it to her face, turns and looks at the camera. This 'look' is sustained (4–5 seconds long) without any change in her facial expression (Figure 10.2b). She then looks away

before spending another 9–10 seconds moving one of her toys around in a circular motion (Figure 10.2c). And then at line 18 we observe the father returning to the table and on doing so (lines 18–24) displaying annoyance at the fact that she is not eating her food, is now sucking her dummies instead and asserting that she has not ‘even’ tried her food.

Certainly when we consider and compare the manner of these looks towards and actions in front of the camera (extracts 2 and 3), the earlier example, although highlighting the child’s recognition of the camera’s presence, nonetheless leaves her experience and responses somewhat difficult to interpret. In extract 3, in contrast, the looks she directs at the camera happen at a particular point in the sequence where (a) she is being asked to do something she does not wish to; (b) her response towards the food indicates she has little intention of carrying out the adult’s request; and (c) instead engages in a series of actions which, in this particular family, are recognised as inappropriate and prohibited in this context (using her pacifiers). The length of the ‘look’, its manner and the specific moment in time that it occurs lend credence to the suggestion that she displays a recognition of being watched and is possibly being



Figure 10.2 Video-recording accompanying extract 3. (a) Ella reaches for her ‘pub’ and puts it into her mouth; (b) Ella reaches for the second dummy and looks at the camera; (c) Ella moves one of her toys around in a circular movement.

### *The video-camera as a cultural object*

held accountable in some way (i.e. in the sense that somebody is watching you ‘being naughty’, and you notice that the watching is happening).

In the final extract for consideration, and recorded when the child was 4 months older, Ella’s understanding and perception of the video-camera in the context of her everyday life become both a topic for specific comment by herself and others, and also an object that elicits particular kinds of behaviours and responses. The extent to which she seems to treat the camera both as a presence (an entity to interact with) and as something akin to a ‘mirror’ (showing what ‘it’ can see) seems to initiate an interesting series of gestures and actions by the child. Again, we also observe how the father/researcher is treating the camera as a particular kind of object.

#### **Extract 4: Child age 3 years 3 months**

##### ***Context***

As before, the recording context is mealtime (breakfast) and on this occasion, following the meal, the father is reading a book on the table (not interacting with the child). Ella is playing with a collection of large alphabet cards in front of her on the table and one of her soft toys is placed nearby.

##### ***Summary exposition of extract***

On this occasion the child treats the video-camera (when the view-finder/display is visible to her) in a manner not dissimilar to responses children often exhibit when in front of a mirror.

#### **Extract 4**

Child age 3 years 3 months

---

- 1 *ELL*: sun sk:::y ((child singing across the next few lines))
- 2 (1.2)
- 3 *ELL*: bethlehem
- 4 (0.3)
- 5 *ELL*: ↑bethlehem xxx
- 6 (2.4)
- 7 *ELL*: xxxx xxxx come for you xxx
- 8 (7.8)
- 9 *ELL*: it’s not coming ↑U::p ((looking at camera))
- 10 (0.8) ((child continues pointing – moving index finger))
- 11 *FAT*: what’s not coming up darlin =
- 12 *ELL*: =that thing
- 13 (0.1)
- 14 *FAT*: the camera?

(Continued)



Extract 4 (Cont.)

15 (0.3)  
 16 *ELL*: °n:: ↑:o↓°  
 17 (0.7)  
 18 *FAT*: ((coughs twice))  
 19 (0.4)  
 20 *ELL*: can you turn it round?  
 21 (1.3) ((father moves from the chair))  
 22 *ELL*: cant see it  
 23 (1.3)  
 24 *FAT*: [[[coughs]]]  
 25 *ELL*: [°an turn an xxx it°] ((child holding hand up and doing 'turning' motion))  
 26 ((F turns the display viewer on the camera around))  
 27 (5.4) ((on seeing her own image, child smiles))  
 28 *ELL*: a:::w =  
 29 *FAT*: =a::w awawa  
 30 (1.1)  
 31 *FAT*: now we can see grommit ((name of soft toy on table))  
 32 (4.1)  
 33 *FAT*: grommit's looking quiet isn't he  
 34 (0.6)  
 35 *FAT*: he he (.) -hhh  
 36 (2.2)  
 37 *FAT*: ((coughs))  
 38 (14.4)  
 39 *ELL*: he had his breakfast (.) and now he's coming to play like a bi::g (.) big (.) big  
 40 ↓doggy  
 41 (3.2)  
 42 *ELL*: and he ate all his breakfast  
 43 (1.5)

The extract begins with the child playing with large cards on the table (the father reading) and quietly singing to herself. During the quite long pause at line 8, during which it appears that she is trying to rub something out of one of her eyes, she looks across to her father, then turns and looks briefly towards the camera and then turns back towards her father again (who continues reading). She then turns again towards the camera, and as she utters line 9, raises her hand, points at the camera, and on finishing speaking, continues to look while moving/wiggling her finger as she holds her hand in the pointed position.

At line 11, and in reply, the father turns towards her, glances at the camera, then moves towards and close to the child, looking at her (not the camera) when he asks his question. When he replies with his question (after the briefest

of pauses), he also turns towards the camera. Her quiet response to this question is noteworthy in that it is very quiet, is not in the affirmative and accompanied by a pitch/intonation contour indicative of communicating 'no, it is not' (coming up).

Leaving aside the possibility that his 'cough' that then follows might indicate his recognition/reminder that they are being filmed, Ella then, at line 20, asks if the view-finder/display attachment can be 'turned around'. As he moves from the table to alter the video-camera, she says very quietly something that sounds like 'and turn and see it', while at the same time holding out her hand in front of her and 'simulating' the turning motion of the display part of the video.

What happens next is striking and not dissimilar to the responses young pre-school children exhibit when placed in front of full-length mirrors (Vyt, 2001; Bard et al., 2006). Just before her utterance at line 28, she first smiles, bringing her hand to her face in a posture Goffman (1979) describes as a 'cant' (a head or body posture of subordination). As she continues her gaze/smile the father immediately imitates/repeats her 'aw-Isn't that nice' sound and, as he returns to sit at the table, comments that now she can see her soft toy. Notice he doesn't say, 'now you can see yourself' or 'oh look, I can see you'. His comment may indicate his efforts at maintaining a 'researcher/professional' perspective on this sequence of events. Instead he says, 'now we can see grommit' (the toy sitting on the table). Of course, an alternative reading is that the adult, given that he was busy reading and not interacting with the child, simply did not wish to be disturbed and produced this comment so as to increase the likelihood that the child would play with the soft toy, leaving him to read.

What is of interest here, and again with reference to how the child participant understands the presence of the camera, is what happens next. The child (line 32) maintains a close studied gaze towards the camera/mirror and, after 4 seconds, the father suggests that the soft toy is not saying very much. Notwithstanding the possibility that this comment is related to the fact that the child is not saying very much at this point, at line 38, after a brief cough, the father returns to reading the book on the table. At this point, we observe an elaborate and detailed set of responses or performed interactions in front of/with the camera/mirror by the child. While continuously looking at the video-sequence of herself in the view-finder, she first waves the large card in her hand, then puts the card under her chin, strokes her own body with the card, places it down, and although continuing to look at her image, then moves towards the soft toy, gives it a cuddle while still looking, and finally after this somewhat 'plaintive' performance, moves away and makes a comment about the soft toy. The father then turns around and looks again at the child.

Consider for a moment how the child responds to the camcorder view-screen, keeping in mind that she requested to see it in the first place. It is difficult to know what is going on here, and how we are to understand the series of actions and gestures initiated following the moment when the view-screen is turned around. The sequence of her gestures, actions and comments moves from offers 'to the camera/

self-image', touching the card against her body, face and head, while continuously looking, and then performing 'with' and 'comforting her toy dog'. This complex sequence of responses and actions is likely to be an expression of the child's own self-positioning, self-image recognition and the playing-around with image manipulation that children often engage in at around this age. At the very least we can say that the view-finder/camera object is now oriented to, and used by, the child in a manner which highlights something of the multiple associations it brings into play simply by its presence in this kind of context. The video-camera is a cultural object of a particular kind and, for many children during the early years, experienced within and through discursive contexts which predicate the significance not so much of the image (photograph) but of the film or video-sequence – the video-clip of the first day at school, the week-end holiday break, the school play and all the self-recordings of everyday play between children. We are only beginning to understand how children themselves understand and orient to such practices.

### Concluding comments

At some risk of stating the obvious, there is of course a close interdependence between chronological development and changing research practices. CA is unthinkable without the development of cheap, reliable, portable recording and playback of talk. The video-camera and associated recording techniques and practices have similarly initiated emerging orientations, perspectives and specific practices, which serve to add to the study of naturalistic everyday human interaction. Notice, for example, in discussion and explication of extracts in CA publications (Schegloff, 1992) the referencing of the original recording of the event. One reading of such practices might be something along the lines of 'well, if you don't agree with the analysis, have a look at the video-sequence yourself, and you'll see what I mean'. It is the predicating of the significance or the 'very obviousness' or 'realness' of the associated recording that should draw our attention to the difficulties involved in the analysis of video-recordings. In a way it is reminiscent of Roland Barthes's (1982) comment that every photograph is a certificate of presence (*Camera Lucida*, p. 81), the video-sequence unfolding-ly making available to us, this, then that, then the next thing. This makes it increasingly difficult to recognise, in the process of analysis, the interrelationships between event selection, interpretation and the subsequent production of the extract/video-clip as analytic object. When the selection, capturing, recording and production of the event are themselves a result of an 'insider participant' researcher's own agenda, then matters can indeed become both more complicated and potentially ambiguous.

The extracts examined above may also highlight certain hitherto unrecognised issues regarding the participant's own recognition and orientation to the video-camera in situ. Through documenting one child's changing responses to, and interaction with, the camera we are able to see that, for her, the camera as a cultural object has a particular and occasioned status within

family life. Initially these responses are minimal and maybe of little remark, but increasingly it would seem the camera plays a somewhat ambiguous role – potentially a source of comfort and redress (extract 2) or something more akin to a ‘presence’ which presupposes accountability (extract 3). Certainly, towards the end of the research study, the child’s recognition and orientation towards the camera appear intertwined with the documenting of records, and indeed, her own self-positioning and self-image-play (extract 4).

We also noted that the researcher himself has a somewhat peculiar relationship or orientation to the camera, envisioned not only on those occasions where the recognition or at least projection of ‘possible audiences’ in the future becomes clear (extract 1), and needless to say, in the contribution that constitutes this chapter. The traditional boundaries between participant and researcher, as Hall (2000) intimated, do indeed become somewhat amorphous when engaged in ‘insider participation’ research concerned with documenting and analysing the everyday world of human interaction.

The analysis of the extracts in this chapters reminds us of the challenges and complexities surrounding the recording and analysis of whatever constitutes everyday naturalistic interaction. Within social science, and in particular psychology, there remains a certain suspicion and scepticism over the interdependence between interpretation and the object of analysis. To some extent this reflects the particular emphasis on the experimental laboratory in the discipline such that observational methodologies themselves were traditionally viewed as belonging to the qualitative end of the methodological spectrum. In fact, developmental psychology, and particularly those branches concerned with documenting naturally occurring interactions (e.g. Smith and Connolly, 1980), adapted and extended techniques and procedures from ethology into sophisticated protocols for observational sampling (Altmann, 1974). The initial coding of an event as an instance of a coding category remains the starting point of this form of observational analysis and an important element of such procedures was the development of reliability procedures for establishing, measuring and assessing inter-observer reliability (e.g. the kappa co-efficient index). With the gradual introduction and spread of audio and then video-technologies alongside the focus on procedures and practices concerning the documentation of the record of what ‘has truly happened’, computer-based video technologies have, if anything, increased the focus on quantification (e.g. the Observer Video-Pro system, Noldus et al., 2000).

It is against this background that researchers in psychology using visual methods and adopting qualitative approaches in the study of human interaction have established and developed interpretative approaches from varying perspectives, e.g. ethnomethodological, discursive, ethnographic and social-semiotic. The examples above may help contribute to these recent developments through seeking to understand more of what the presence of recording equipment, and being recorded, might mean to people. How, we might ask, are the various technologies integrated into people’s everyday sense-making practices? What forms of analysis might we use which draw out the subtle nature of the interdependence between the document record itself and the conditions within which such records are produced and made

realisable? The participant-orientation focus of ethnomethodologically informed CA certainly highlights the reflexive nature of everyday sense-making practices in situ. The status of being an 'insider participant', that is, when a researcher straddles the boundaries between being 'object of analysis' and 'interpreter', does however draw our attention to the ongoing challenges central to the interdependence between the production of analytic objects (the video segment, the transcribed extract) and corresponding interpretation.

## Appendix 1

### *Conversation analysis orthography*

Table A10.1 Conversation analysis: transcription conventions

<i>Transcription element</i>	<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Transcription element</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
↑or↓	Marked rise (or fall) in intonation	:::	Sounds that are stretched or drawn out (number of :: indicates the length of stretching)
<u>underlining</u>	Used for emphasis (parts of the utterance that are stressed)	[]	Overlaps, cases of simultaneous speech or interruptions
UPPER-CASE LETTERS	Indicate increased volume (note: this can be combined with underlining)	° word °	Shown when a passage of talk is noticeably quieter than the surrounding talk
.hhh	A row of h with a dot in front of it indicates an inbreath; without the dot an outbreath	=	When there is nearly no gap at all between one utterance and another
(comment)	Analyst's comment about something going on in the talk	(.)	Small pauses
>word<	Noticeably faster speech	(1.4)	Silences (time in seconds)
<word>	Noticeably slower speech	(xx)	Untranscribed talk

Source: adapted from Forrester (2010).

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# 11

## GIRLS ON FILM

### Video diaries as ‘autoethnographies’

*Maria Pini and Valerie Walkerdine*

We want you to picture a scene on screen:

A young black woman sits on her bed, adjusting the video camera which she has balanced in front of her. ‘I’m literally whispering now ‘cause the walls in my house have ears’ she says into her hand-held mike. ‘This is quite private. It’s quite personal, ‘cause I don’t really talk to anyone, about this sort of thing, in my family. So most of the time, they don’t know what I’m thinking or what I’m planning or anything. So I got to keep it down’ she says, gradually lowering her voice.

The above describes an extract taken from a video diary made by Rose. Rose’s admission to camera (and within a video diary which she believes may well end up being broadcast on national television) that she has to whisper, because what she wants to say is very personal, brings up some of the issues addressed by this chapter. Centrally, we want to focus upon some of the questions which arise both in relation to treating the video diary as ‘research data’, and in terms of notions about ‘empowering’ the research subject to ‘tell her own story’, so to speak. What *do* we (or more precisely what do we, as social researchers interested in questions of subjectivity) get from the video diary, if not some kind of ‘innocent’, more ‘authentic’ or ‘uncontaminated’ (by the research process) representation of self? How do we interpret such representations, and what do such data give us that a more traditional research method does not?

This chapter argues that, when treated in ways which resist treating this material as ‘innocent’, ‘transparent’ or as closed to re/interpretation, the video diary can provide a particularly rich site for the investigation of situated subjectivity; being as lived within a complex network of social relations. In particular, we are drawing, in making our case, upon some of the work done by Catherine Russell (1999) on experimental ethnography and, in particular, her work on autoethnography.



### **Birth of a video diaries project**

The video diaries project from which Rose's diary comes was the last phase of a longitudinal study of two groups of young British women who were, at the time of making their video diaries, aged either 16 or 21 years old. Both groups (one working-class and one middle-class) had been studied at various different earlier stages in their lives, and by means of a variety of more traditional data collection methods. The 21-year-olds were studied for the first time when they were 4, and the 16-year-olds when they were 6. The initial research aims were to examine how social class came to inform these different women's life trajectories. In the final phase of the project, the original research team (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody; see Walkerdine et al. 2001) asked the women to produce a video diary. Of the 30 young women originally involved in the study, 23 produced a video diary, but because all of these women were white, a further sample of six black and Asian women was added at this point.

Although it is important to remain critical in interpreting the video diary data produced by these young women (and we move on to this shortly), this material undoubtedly adds a rich body of fresh data to the project. This added depth comes primarily (albeit not unproblematically) from the fact that the research subjects can, and often did, appear to be more open and spontaneous in presenting themselves. This is partly connected to the absence of a figure of authority and to a figure who can 'talk back'. The camera (however much it might *signify* a researcher, a study or an observer) remains inanimate and silent. And this can make it a particularly rich surface for a subject's own projections. In one way, then, the camera functions as a blank page of a diary. Indeed, in an interview conducted when the project was over, several diarists did liken the practice to that of keeping a written diary. As one subject recalls:

It was like my diary. You could say anything about your feelings or whatever and no one would ever say 'you're not allowed to do that', or 'you've got to be in by 10' or any of that. Whatever you wanted to say or do and wherever you wanted to take it, that was alright. It was someone to talk to that would never answer back.

For many subjects, then, the camera was treated as a trusted confidante; a good friend who listens but doesn't pass judgement. For many, it provided an 'ear' when a diarist felt no one else was listening to her. Rose's extract provides a particularly clear example of this.

### **From academe to television**

The original research team had a number of reasons for wanting to pilot the video diary as a research method within this final phase of their project: the 'transition to womanhood' phase. Principally, the idea arose in thinking about a way of collecting data which might be somehow less 'invasive'. The team wanted, that is, to develop an observational method which did not depend upon the presence of what might be experienced by subjects as a 'surveillant' outsider, and which might also be understood

by these subjects as a somehow ‘empowering’ experience – an opportunity for them to tell their ‘own’ stories, so to speak. Given the many well-documented problems associated with researching ‘youth’, and because of the numerous critiques made of the power relations produced within the traditional research setting, getting research subjects *themselves* to produce data seemed to suggest one way forward. Not only did this method constitute a seemingly less ‘invasive’ means of gathering data, but it also provided a way of working with a medium with which young people were becoming increasingly more familiar and comfortable. Plus, in this study at least, it was found that some of the working-class girls were not always particularly confident about their literacy skills and here video seemed to suggest a way of producing diaries (as personal records of subjectivity) without involving any writing. The research team were interested, then, in piloting a research method which gave the researcher a seemingly more marginal role, thereby affording research subjects a greater degree of control over the data produced.

Such ideas about empowerment and access (giving these girls the means by which to represent *themselves*) echoed not only a long-established feminist interest in the production of what can be called ‘counter-fictions’ of femininity, but it also echoed moves within British broadcast television of the time. The video diary genre was developed by the BBC’s Community Programme Unit, and came about as a response by broadcasters interested in ‘access TV’ (non-professionals making TV programmes) to the proliferation of Hi8 then DV camcorders in the 1990s. As Tony Downmunt (2001) explains:

Although cheap, portable, user-friendly video cameras and recorders had been available for the previous 20 years, the coming of Hi8 was the first time that the image quality they offered passed the minimum quality threshold of the broadcast TV engineers, and an industry quick to cut production costs quickly adopted the camcorder in a wide range of factual programming.

*Downmunt (2001)*

As Downmunt points out, however, the advent of the video diary genre within UK television cannot be understood purely in technological or economic terms. It was not simply the case that cheap-enough and good-enough cameras were now available to ‘Joe Bloggs’. The move towards ‘real people television’ within the UK also reflected far broader ideological shifts marking the development of postmodernism. In Downmunt’s (2001) words, the growth in ‘real people television’:

also both reflected and deepened an ongoing post-modern crisis of documentary authority. Whilst the globalisation and centralisation of media power has continued apace it has been accompanied by a seemingly contradictory fragmentation of cultures and political systems. The fragmentation has been reflected by the proliferation of subjective media forms such as camcorder video, which have served to undermine the citadel of objective realism and the sudden infusion of camcorder truth into the mass media domain reflects wider cultural developments.

Subjectivity, the personal, the intimate, as the only remaining responses to a chaotic, senseless, out of control world in which the kind of objectivity demanded by the grand narratives, is no longer possible.

The 'transition to womanhood' research team was inspired by the work of the Community Programme Unit and, having identified girls willing to produce a diary, the team approached the Unit with the idea of a collaborative project. The BBC offered some training in video diary production, but it was Channel Four television which actually contributed funding to buy Hi8 camcorders on the understanding that they could broadcast any programmes which might result from the material. Four years later, in 1996, the team returned to Channel Four with the results, 175 hours of diary material having been recorded.

By this point, however, there had been significant changes in personnel within the Independent Film and Video Department at Channel Four, and in the philosophy of the department as a whole. The research team had originally wanted to make a series of 1-hour documentaries that would reflect the depth and breadth of the diaries and highlight what these said about class and femininity within contemporary Britain. It was quickly obvious, however, that the new regime at Channel Four was not interested in this. Where the team had envisaged a collection of 'serious' documentaries, Channel Four wanted a focus on, in their words, 'the feisty dynamism of the girls'. At this time, a proliferation of popular cultural discourses was coming to cohere around the concept of 'girl power'. Channel Four's desired focus has to be understood in this context. Eventually for television, the material became *Girls, Girls, Girls*, a series of ten 3-minute programmes shown in *The Slot*, a 3-minute strand at 7.55 pm after the news. As Downmunt (2001) puts it in explaining the situation:

the serious, analytical and issue-based documentary form was increasingly being eclipsed at the time by the ratings-grabbing docu-soap. And the concept of 'access TV' was by then completely out of fashion'.

*Downmunt (2001)*

The video diary project began at a very particular time, then. As Downmunt argues, the situation had changed by the time the bulk of the data had been gathered. The project started against a backdrop of belief in the potentially 'empowering' nature of the video diary. Not only did 'access TV' promise a new public visibility for previously marginalised groups, the video diary suggested the production of something more of the subject's own making, and therefore something which was in some ways more 'pure', or less 'mediated' by another's gaze, be this the gaze of a television production team or that of an academic research team.

Of course, it is easy to understand the original team's beliefs about what they were doing. Aside from the general postmodern crisis of representation which Downmunt discusses, the diary format has a long history as a record of personal experience. It is easy to believe that what we are getting with the video diary is something more 'authentic'. As Lucey (1997) puts it:

The testimonial or confessional character of the diary promises a site of veracity and authenticity originating in the diarist's experience.

*Lucey (1997)*

Indeed, the camera became for many of these young women a 'friend' who accompanies them on their various outings; who sits listening to them late at night and who shares secrets that, in Rose's words, 'cause the walls in my house have ears'. This intimacy becomes most obvious in the close-up piece to camera which, in Downmunt's view, is a technique which enables the diarist to present herself as an individual with her own agency. This is also what makes the video diary, for any viewer, such a powerful and immediate statement of the maker's subjectivity. As Mark Reid (1999) has put it:

Being challenged by the face of the author maybe demands that they have a voice, and introduces an ethical dimension to interpretation. The notion of representation is predicated on the subject represented as other and alien which has the unfortunate effect of silencing them as agents.

*Reid (1999)*

For Reid, the up-close presence of a diarist's talking face works to upset representation. The video diary guarantees a sense of subjective truth. In so many respects, the diaries come framed in the promise of the 'authentic'. Not only are these young women seemingly telling and showing their *own* stories, but the video diary speaks such a familiar language of realism. The diaries often deal with the domestic, the mundane, the everyday, the seemingly inconsequential, with the passage of real time and with a diarist's often quite disorganised 'streams of consciousness'. They have the appearance of truths spoken from the heart. It is in relation to this that Downmunt has argued that the video diary challenges representation, because it is self-expression rather than representation. 'These' he argues, 'are presentations of self' rather than re-presentations of prior existing selves.

The concept of authenticity has remained a central theme in anthropological explorations and discussions around the development of film and video as a research tool. Because video diaries have managed to do away with both elaborate technology and a film crew, they can make seductive claims to authenticity. We can very easily get drawn into thinking that, because there is no film crew, people act as though they were not being watched or as though the camera weren't actually there, and that what we consequently get is something less 'mediated'. All of this, of course, is based upon the notion that what subjects might say about themselves is necessarily more 'pure' and also more 'valid' than what someone else might say about them.

### **The inevitable limitations of expression and visibility**

Clearly, some of the initial beliefs underpinning the development of this phase of the project were based on fictions which are obviously very problematic. For one thing, all of this material is subject to a manifold process of editing. From the

condensation of a complicated body of material down into the ‘feisty dynamism’ displayed within the 3-minute *Girls, Girls, Girls* programmes, to the self-editing done by the girls who erased before submitting their tapes, to the diarist who very obviously sets the physical stage for her piece, any notion of, or concern for, ‘authenticity’ is redundant.

Furthermore, although the diaries may appear to hold truths ‘spoken from the heart’, the make-up of this ‘heart’ needs to be rethought. The way Downmunt addresses it, it is as though the essence of this self-expressing voice is somehow beyond its cultural make-up; unmarked by a whole host of stratifying classifications including, in this case, class and ethnicity. Certainly, with these diary data, it very quickly became obvious that to see this exercise as somehow ‘empowering’ the research subjects was naïve. Although in *one* sense, in the absence of a physical observer, the diarist *can* feel less surveilled, this is by no means straightforward. The physical observer may well be absent (and this clearly has its advantages) but very often she is brought back into play through the diarist’s own projections on to camera – which is often addressed as ‘you’. But more than this, many of these women make it very clear that they are *intensely* aware of being watched – and not by just anyone, but by research-psychologists in particular. Within the diaries, we frequently encounter diarists referring to the longitudinal study itself. One particularly clear example is given in Chloe’s diary. In the following, Chloe (a white, middle-class diarist) is videoing her friend, who sits in front of the camera, smoking a cigarette as she addresses Chloe:

‘What’s it all for?’ she asks the invisible cameraperson, who does not, at first, respond. The woman continues. ‘It’s all a bit voyeuristic this, you know. Being watched I feel quite ...’. She hesitates. ‘Quite looked at?’ the cameraperson suggests. ‘Yes’, the woman replies. ‘Well’, the cameraperson replies, ‘I’ve been studied since I was four, you know. They’ve given me this camera to make a video diary of myself. It’s a longitudinal study of social class and femininity in the nineties and I’m supposed to film myself every day. They want to understand how middle-class and working-class girls live differently in nineties Britain. When I was four, I had a microphone attached to me and they were interested in how our mothers – middle-class and working-class mothers – treated us differently. They’re still studying those kinds of questions.’ The cameraperson pauses and the young woman nods, saying ‘it’s interesting’. ‘Yes’, continues the cameraperson, ‘but it’s not very objective, is it? I mean, they’ve explained it all to us and we know exactly what they’re looking for’. She pauses for a while before continuing. ‘But I suppose that’s what they want, you know. See, they’re not really interested in those kind of science models of research. So they don’t mind that we know exactly what they’re looking for.’

For Chloe, we (as researchers), our questions, our project’s foci and even our methodology are ever-present within her video diary. This is not about something produced away from the research ‘gaze’. What is produced is always done so in

response to the perceived focus of the project. The diarist always produces herself as a *particular* kind of subject in response to this focus. For this reason, what we watch as researchers is not simply a representation of subjects constituted within particular class and gender relations, but also in relation to a particular focus. The particular technology of representation is crucial and the (albeit materially absent) audience is ever-present. These subjects are constituted within a particular 'to-be-looked-at' situation and Chloe is by no means alone in making an ever-present awareness of this obvious. Often, an explicit (and sometimes critical) reference to psychology and to the research gaze in general is evident. We therefore encounter frequent reference to what is obviously seen to be a normative psychological gaze – with many of the diarists talking about not wanting to appear 'weird', or being concerned about appearing 'normal'. Indeed, concerns about appearance (about appearing respectable and 'normal') are rarely absent from the diaries. Often, such concern takes a particular form with the white, working-class girls – who in several instances appear very aware of how their homes and their accents, for example, might mark them out as 'different'. The black and Asian diarists, having been recruited to the project at a much later stage, are somewhat different in this respect. These women *knew* from the beginning of their involvement that their diaries might well be broadcast on national television. So for these women, this project always involved the possibility of their being visible to a far wider audience.

An awareness of the signifiers of accent (a clear indicator of one's social class position within Britain) signals itself in a variety of ways for the working-class white girls. In one diary, for example, the diarist's grandmother very obviously adopts a 'posh' accent every time she believes that she is being filmed. On several such occasions, in a clearly affected upper-class accent she says 'the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain', a famous line repeated by Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion* the play/*My Fair Lady* the film, as part of her elocution training.

Other diarists, too, refer quite explicitly to a kind of voyeurism which they associate with the gaze of the researcher, saying things like 'see, this is how people like us behave' or 'see, this is what black people do'. To return to Rose's diary, another section of this shows a scene wherein a room full of young black people are gathered chatting at a social get-together. Rose appears on screen among her friends and a male voice is heard behind the camera. This male friend is doing the videoing. As he pans those gathered, zooming into smaller groups and particular faces, he adopts the voice of the 'television anthropologist', giving a running commentary as he films. 'See the jungle', he announces, adopting a slow, deep, David Attenborough-like voice. 'Here, this one's from Central Africa', he says, as he zooms into one woman's face. He then zooms out and pans further, before zooming into the couple sitting next to her and saying 'here's a couple from the depths of darkest Africa'.

The above example illustrates very clearly one of the most important aspects of the diary data as a whole: the video diary is *always* produced with an audience in mind. The (imagined) interpretative gaze of the researcher is always a reference point. In the above extract, this gaze is being played with or 'mocked'. A very similar approach to this gaze is evidenced within an extract from Jane's diary. Here,

Jane and her friend have dressed up and have set a table with plates, flowers, glasses, a filled fruit bowl and a bottle of champagne, in staging what they call an ‘average, everyday breakfast’. Music is playing in the background as the girls joke and speak in ‘posh’ accents, toasting the camera and feeding each other strawberries. The humour of the scene is very clearly structured around the perceived focus of the project. This is a ‘middle-class breakfast’ ‘middle ... “spooof”’.

If imagining that the video diarist feels somehow less surveilled is mistaken, then so too is thinking that actually making a diary is a necessarily ‘empowering’ experience for these young women. Clearly, what can appear as ‘empowerment’ within one situation – for example, the camera enabling Rose to tell a story which not even the ‘walls’ of her house can hear – can appear within another as something quite different. Again, some of the working-class, white women often gave the impression of having experienced this exercise as, in some ways, another way of being subjected to the surveillant and normative gaze of the (middle-class, usually white) researcher. In later commenting upon how they had experienced the exercise, many of these women spoke of not really having enjoyed this, and some mentioned videoing out of a strong sense of obligation rather than out of enjoyment. As indicated, some also spoke about hating their accents because these make them appear ‘common’. And although they were asked not to, several of the working-class girls signalled a certain ‘resistance’ to the project by actually wiping much or all of their diary before handing in their tape.

Many of the research team’s initial assumptions have, then, been shown to be rather naïve. Although there are clearly advantages with being able to gather research data without a researcher being physically present, it is important not to read the data gathered as somehow ‘uncontaminated’ by the research gaze. In many ways, this physical absence actually makes very little difference. Aspects of the same interpretative mechanics are seen to be at play.

### **Video diaries as autoethnographies**

When assessing the usefulness of the video diary as data, then, one first step involves letting go of any easy over-simplistic notions of ‘authenticity’, ‘access’ and ‘empowerment’. One way to do this is through turning to moves made within postmodern and postcolonial ethnography, towards the use of film and video in the development of a ‘visual ethnography’. Analysis of this data moved, then, towards considering the diaries in relation to Russell’s discussion of recent experimental ethnography – to thinking about the diaries as ‘autoethnographies’. This provides a far more useful set of questions from which to move forwards. In some ways, this is a problematic move, we know, because after all, these diarists are not actual film makers, and Russell focuses primarily upon the work of artists and theorists who are formally involved in the production of avant-garde or otherwise experimental autobiographical film work. Nevertheless, these video diaries can be usefully considered in parallel to such practice. As Russell (1999: 276) explains:

Autobiography becomes ethnographic at that point when the film – or video – maker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes. Identity is no longer a transcendental or essential self that is revealed, but a ‘staging of subjectivity’ – a representation of the self as performance.

*Russell (1999)*

Despite the fact that these diarists are not intentionally or formally setting out to conduct ‘visual ethnography’, they are nevertheless on an ethnographic journey. They are invited to take a particular ‘ethnographic’ position in relation to themselves and their situations. Furthermore, they *do* understand themselves to be ‘implicated in larger social formations and historical processes’. They know that this is a study about class and femininity within the Britain of the 1990s. They know that they are the subjects of this study. They are therefore invited to recognise themselves in-situation, in-history and in-culture. Chloe speaks openly about having been a research subject since the age of four. Rose’s friend takes up the position of ‘anthropologist’ as he films the party of young black friends at her house. Like all of the diarists, these two, when addressing the viewing ‘you’, are situating themselves in relation to the foci of this project.

These diarists are, then, invited to take up a dual position of both observer and observed. They move through an ‘in between’, situated partly as authors of their own stories and partly as subjects of this story. Because of this dual situation, argues Russell, the autoethnography inevitably produces a representation of self which is unambiguously a performance – which, rather than being a sign of coherence, is in fact about multiplicity. As she puts it:

Autoethnography produces a subjective space that combines anthropologist and informant, subject and object of the gaze under one sign.

One interesting aspect of this multiplicity to emerge from the present data comes through seeing the diarists’ illustrations of the diverse positions they occupy within their own circumstances. In simple terms, within a single diary, the diarist can be friend, daughter, sibling, student and worker; each position demanding a somewhat different performance of self. Usually, before friends, a diarist will often present a very different self than that presented before parents. And when alone, before the camera, a different self again.

The video diarist verbally addresses and visually displays the general sense of multiplicity and fragmentation constituting her situation. The viewer is made party to the make-up of selves as these are situated within, and move between, different contexts. A particularly clear example of this is shown when a diarist comments retrospectively to camera about something videoed earlier. There are, for example, a number of instances where a diarist will film herself along with friends within one context and later comment on this footage. Within her initial footage, she might appear as confident and happy, for example. But later, when alone and doing a piece to camera, she can present a very different reading of what was going on; of how she



was feeling whilst videoing. Diane, for example, presents as a confident, funny, young woman whilst in a scene where she is videoing with friends at a picnic. Later, however, when alone and reflecting on the day's events, she speaks to camera about having felt 'left out' by the group. She thus offers a very different reading – one which highlights the multiplicity and fragmentation constituting subjectivity. These examples highlight how the video diary deals with *situated* subjectivity.

Clearly we have long passed simple questions about 'authenticity', coherence and straightforward 'empowerment'. Instead, what this diary material forces is a recognition of multiplicity and fragmentation. The video diary opens a space within which, in the process of both embodying and representing self, gaps, contradictions and difference are made visible.

### **Inauthentic subjectivities: using video diaries in a study of class and femininity**

Autoethnography is a vehicle and a strategy for challenging imposed forms of identity and exploring the discursive possibilities of inauthentic subjectivities.

(Russell 1999: 276)

In analysing the video diary data, with a focus upon the initial research team's questions about social class and femininity, it soon becomes clear that in many ways this material upsets classifications. It is much harder than it might be with an audio-taped interview or with a questionnaire to keep categories such as 'working-class' or 'woman' in place. Here, we are dealing with data which, above all, highlight the multiplicity and fragmentation involved in the constitution of subjectivity. In Russell's terms, reading such data begs an exploration of the discursive possibilities within these categories. Although we can draw broad conclusions about general differences between the diaries produced by the working-class and by the middle-class diarists (and these are drawn out in brief shortly), hard-and-fast distinctions are made impossible. These data include diaries illustrating 'confident' middle-class girls; 'camera-shy' working-class girls; 'confident' and 'creative' working-class girls; less 'confident' middle-class girls and so forth. A single diarist can display moments of 'confidence', moments of apparent 'shyness' and moments in which she is simply ridiculing the whole diary exercise. The categories of class and gender simply cannot contain, in any hard-and-fast way, this material. They cannot say *all* that there is to say about a given diarist or about any group as a whole. Although this is *always* the case with the analysis of subjectivity, by means of *any* methodology, the visual component here makes classification even more difficult. The data force an engagement with the *specific*. These diarists, in producing detailed visual illustrations of their situations, highlight not simply their conformity to any general rules about class and gender, but importantly, to their *individual* negotiations of these classifications. As Russell (1999: 276) puts it in addressing ethnicity, anthropology and autoethnography:

One's body and one's historical moment may well be the joint site of experience and identity, and yet, they don't necessarily add up to ethnicity as an anthropological category. Autoethnography is a vehicle and a strategy for challenging imposed forms of identity and exploring the discursive possibilities of inauthentic subjectivities.

*Russell (1999)*

At the start of analysing these data, a long time was spent attempting to neatly fit the different diaries into class 'boxes'; to find general rules about class location and differences in diary-making. Inevitably, much time was wasted. If anything, these data challenge such imposed classifications and, although we now illustrate several of the more obvious points to emerge in thinking about social class differences and diary-making, we stress that to collapse any given diary into this frame simply does not do justice to the complexity of the material.

To return to the question of social class and diary-making, then, we close with several diary extract descriptions, chosen because they illustrate something of the different material, linguistic, social and also interpretative resources which these different (and differently situated, in terms of social class) diarists seemingly have access to in fabricating a visual fiction of self. We bring together extracts from Susan's diary, Ann's diary, Penelope's diary and Rose's diary in order to highlight one important aspect of the project's findings. In short, the extracts arguably highlight the different storytelling opportunities available to the working-class and the middle-class diarists. To reiterate, however, these extracts do not say *all* that there is to say about the subjectivity of their makers and we return to this in our final comments.

Susan is one of the working-class diarists. In this extract, Susan is sitting on her single bed. Behind her a number of rosettes hang on the wall. Susan remains seated in the same position throughout this 8-minute piece. Her voice is quiet throughout, at points becoming almost inaudible. She checks the camera, and begins a short piece-to-camera:

'I've been with my boyfriend, Mike, for three years and one month at the end of this month. So it's quite a long time. And we met in a pub. My mum used to go there with her friend. And Mike's mum used to know my mum's friend and I met him and then I gave him a letter. And he said 'yes'. And we started going out and that's it really.' She pauses and looks around her room seemingly considering what to do next.

'And we've been going out about three years or something. So it's quite a long time and ... well, so ...' Again, Susan pauses.

'I went to two schools and um ... I left in June 1990, and that was it really. And Mike's coming later so you'll be able to meet him and I'll be able to show you him. And my friend Sally. She's coming later and ... that's about it really.'. Again, Susan pauses.

'My mum works in the local launderette which is about five minutes' walk down the road, so that's OK. And my nan's just come out of hospital

'cause she's just had her hip done. And my sister's just got a new job in a security company and my dad's got about five weeks off work. So that's about it really.'

This extract illustrates a story very much based within a local, family-based setting. As Susan puts it on several occasions, 'that's it really'.

The second extract comes from a particularly short diary produced by Ann, another working-class diarist. Ann herself does not appear within this piece. Instead she carries the camera as she videos the people gathered within her flat. The extract begins in Ann's kitchen where she is videoing her boyfriend taking a beer from the fridge. The man turns and spots her with the camera:

'Oh no, I hate that', he says to Ann. 'Don't. 'Cause I'll get the hump', he tells her, walking away. Ann follows him into the front room and continues to video. He is clearly annoyed and lifts his hand to cover the camera-lens. The screen goes blank. 'No Chris, don't' Ann shouts. He drops his hand and Ann continues to move around the flat videoing the other friends present. Two women are seated at a table and smile to the camera as Ann videos them.

She continues into the front room where two men, one of them Chris, are watching television. The men ignore her. Seemingly directed at the men, Ann, still videoing announces, 'I'm recording all over what I did today'. This gets Chris' interest and he answers, 'I should think so too. Who'd wanna listen to you?' he mumbles.

Ann's very short diary constitutes a particularly clear example of one aspect to emerge from the data: the seeming limitations and constraints facing the working-class diarists. Ann erases most of her video diary and is told by her boyfriend, Chris, that it's a 'good job'. Like Susan, although for different reasons, she appears at a loss to find material with which to fill her diary.

The third extract is taken from Penelope's diary. Penelope is one of the middle-class diarists. The extract begins with Penelope playing the violin as she stands reading a music score which rests on a stand in front of her. As she plays, she does not face the camera and has obviously got the camera mounted on a tripod. She finishes the music and, still holding her bow, turns to the camera.

'This is actually completely typical', she says, walking around the music stand. 'I've got this Guild Hall deadline to meet by Friday. I've got a philosophy essay to write by Thursday. I've got a folio to prepare for Saturday, with five pieces and I've only got two'. As she says this, Penelope paces the room and uses her fingers to tick off each of her tasks as she lists them.

She continues, 'and I'm babysitting tomorrow and I'm babysitting on Thursday. And I'm having to spend all this time. Come home today, eat some dinner because I'm going to the cinema, so I can't eat later. So I've got two and a half hours and I've just done forty-five minutes of practice

and I've already done two hours' practice this morning. Then I have maybe an hour to write a composition and put it in my folio and ...'. Penelope rubs her eyes as she lists all of the things that she has to do. She continues, 'And I'm not going to do my English essay, and everyday all I'm doing is practising every single day.' Penelope pauses and looks around her. 'It's going to be a really, really bad week.' She pauses again and begins to move around the room, seemingly lost in thought. The scene is quiet for a while. 'Actually not only that', she continues sighing, '... I'm giving a talk tomorrow night. I've got to go to the Performing Arts workshop on Friday because there's no other time I can go and ... so that's two hours at home on Friday to do my practice and to do my folio and Thursday I've got to be in school because ...' she says facing and addressing the camera directly. 'This is really weird – taking to the camera.' She pauses briefly before continuing. 'Oh and it's Reading Week and we have people coming to talk to us so I can't do my homework on Friday lunchtime either which is ... this is completely ridiculous.' Penelope pauses, looking at something off-screen. 'Oh, I've just spotted *The Bell Jar*.' She disappears to follow her gaze. Seconds later she reappears with the book in her hand. She puts it close to the camera lens. 'Yes, we're supposed to read this for English', she says as she walks, once again holding her violin. 'Along with the seven other books I've got on the list to read.' Penelope once again begins playing the violin.

Penelope's entire diary is filled with a host of outings, events, deadlines and pieces-to-camera covering the many things happening within her life, including her fears, aspirations and her dreams. Hers is a particularly long and detailed diary. The contrast which emerges from bringing together Penelope's diary with those produced by Susan and by Ann is stark.

Indeed, in relation to all of the data, the working-class diarists tended to produce shorter diaries and they often tended to display less 'confidence' in presenting themselves and their stories. Where Susan's 5-minute piece to camera involves details of what is going on within her immediate family and two mentions of how long she has been with her boyfriend, Penelope's covers a whole host of involvements in a world far beyond her family. She appears almost breathless in her attempt to fit everything into her video. Where Susan repeats, 'that's about it really', Penelope gives the impression that she could talk for hours. Where Ann erases much of her material, Penelope produces and submits tens of hours' worth.

We might say that the diaries of the working-class girls suggest a far more limited range of storytelling resources. These tend to be shorter and concentrated around the world of home, family and friends. Following this line of argument, we might say that, in many ways, the middle-class girls somehow have it 'better'. Indeed, the video diary phase of this project reinforces many of the findings gathered within previous phases of the project and by means of other research methods. In terms of academic achievement, for example, the best qualified of the working-class girls is less educationally qualified than the lowest academic achiever from the middle-class group. The video diary data add a further illustration of such differences.

It is, however, extremely important to resist being drawn into any straightforward or over-simplistic reading of the middle-class girls from the sample as being necessarily 'better off'. Perhaps one of the most valuable aspects of these data is that they illustrate so clearly that all of these diarists' stories have *more* than one side to them. To reiterate, they highlight the complexity and multiplicity of these stories. Although, read in one light, Penelope appears to *have it all*. She is a confident, successful young woman. However, the above extract can be read in a very different light: she is stressed and having a 'completely typical .... really, really bad week'. Indeed, at a later point in her diary, Penelope videos herself speaking about a particular 'exam dream' she has had. As she speaks, she becomes quite emotional, wiping tears from her eyes as she recounts the dream. In this, her A Level exam results are not good enough to allow her entry into the university of her choice. This particular section of her diary sits in stark contrast to a particular section of Rose's diary where, again, the diarist is talking to camera about her academic situation. Rose is, at the time of making her piece, doing a BTEC course in nursery nursing. Rose videos this particular part of her diary after she has received an especially pleasing mark for a piece of college work. This 30-minute extract is entirely taken up by a demonstration of Rose's pride in the piece of work. In great detail, she recounts what her tutor has told her and as she holds each page of her work close up to the screen, she tells of her absolute delight in scoring so much better than many of her classmates. On one level, Penelope is in a far better position academically than Rose. She is already far better academically qualified than Rose, and has aspirations far more closely associated with traditional notions of 'success'. She plans to go to university. Rose, on the other hand, is studying for a diploma, with the aim of working within a nursery. On one level, she has less reason for such an animated display of pride.

But the above contrast speaks of more than simply the relativity of 'success'. Bringing these two extracts together illustrates how the video diary as a research tool forces an engagement with the complexity and multiplicity of subjectivity. This is by no means to say that the data do not allow for any positive conclusions to be drawn about the subject in question: class and femininity within Britain. Rather, it is to recognise that one of the key advantages of using the video diary material in a study of this kind is that it forces a recognition of the variety of different cultural discourses, be these sexual, racial and/or class-based, making up the subject. In other words, subjectivity is staged here as a site of different discursive pressures and articulations, with individual diarists as negotiators of these conditions.

### **Conclusions: the value of the video diary within social research**

In this chapter, we have sought to suggest some of the advantages of the video diary method in researching subjectivity. We would argue that the primary factor here involves the depth of the material produced. Not only are we presented with subjects' verbal accounts of their situations, but we are also confronted by visual displays of these. Aspects which escape or exceed what a diarist might *say* about

## *Girls on film*

herself are revealed for interpretation. A diarist may claim to be a confident, relaxed and happy young woman, but the fact that she has produced a particularly short diary and that she rarely appears personally within this, choosing instead to film others, suggests something quite different. Furthermore, the fact that she can present herself very differently when amongst friends, amongst family and when alone to camera enables the researcher to speak about the multiple faces of subjectivity. The video diary is, we are arguing, perfectly suited to a study which recognises the complexity and multiplicity of subjectivity. Not only does the subject register herself with *voice*, but with *body* and *context* too. The video diarist is always a *situated subject*.

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# 12

## VISUAL IDENTITIES

### Choreographies of gaze, body movement and speech and ‘ways of knowing’ in mother–midwife interaction

*Helen Lomax*

#### **Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to explore the potential of a video-based, visual methodology for understanding the interactional accomplishment of social identity. Drawing on the theoretical framework of ethnomethodological conversation analysis (CA) and ‘naturally occurring’ video data of mother–midwife interaction (Lomax, 2013), the chapter explores the spatial and visual orientation of speakers in the social construction of identity during routine home visits by midwives. Focusing on sequences of interaction in which mothers talk with midwives about their recent birth experiences, the chapter examines how normative professional and patient identities are accomplished locally and sequentially through the orchestrated gaze, body movement and speech of participants. Interaction can be understood as a choreography in which mothers and midwives display, through their talk and visual attention to the other, their alignment, respectively, to embodied and clinical understandings of birth. These different ways of knowing are reinforced by the asymmetrical organisation of interaction, whereby midwives steer the agenda and mothers are attentive to their questions, ‘responding appropriately to whatever is asked for, at whatever point, and in whatever form’ (Clark and Mishler, 1992:346). The interactional asymmetries which emerge are accomplished posturally and visually through midwives’ inattention to mothers’ speech and gaze.

In focusing on the visual elements of interaction, the chapter responds to an emerging agenda within psychology and the social science which seeks to elaborate how participants experience and re-produce the social world (Henwood et al., 2019). A focus on the spatial organisation of bodies, and more particularly the ways in which an individual’s embodied actions are co-ordinated in response to the actions of a co-

speaker, enables researchers to capture how various forms of self-hood are constituted in diverse spaces. As the chapter considers, institutional priorities are displayed, made visible and 'talked into being' (Heritage, 1984) through the asymmetrical organisation of body movement and speech. These constraints on mothers' (and midwives') voices produce particular maternal and professional identities.

In this way the chapter seeks to consider the full range of communicational forms (body movement, gaze etc.) as well as the materiality of the space as attended to and made use of by participants. This includes a focus on the interaction between mothers and midwives as well as sequences in which I, as the researcher, am observably drawn into the on-going interaction through mothers' visual interaction (gaze, gesture and facial expression). In doing so, my aim is to consider an empirically based reflexive approach which moves beyond confessional reflexive positions in order to enhance research practice and methodology in psychology (Pillow, 2010). Analytic focus on these sequences makes explicit the role of the researcher and video camera in the construction and mediation of video-based data as well as making visible the significance of non-linguistic modes of communication in the construction of normative patient and professional identities.

### **The research context: mothers, midwives and ways of knowing**

A common theme across the academic and professional literature, including some feminist literatures, is the promotion and prioritisation of a model of woman-centred midwifery care which claims to support and empower mothers' ways of knowing through an 'emotionally connected supportive relationship' (Wilkins, 2000:38; Jomeen, 2010). Underpinning this perspective is the view exemplified in psychological and social science literature in which mothers' and midwives' priorities are meshed together as the common-gender-based concerns of women (Campbell and Porter, 1997; Martin, 2001; Borrelli et al., 2016). Despite its limited empirical basis, the ideology of woman-centred midwifery underpins much historical and contemporary professional literature and debate (Hyde and Roche-Reid, 2004; Page and Sandell, 2000; Morgan, 2015), in which midwives are positioned as championing mothers' rights and through a key influence on policy development, in which midwifery care is politicised as a means of re-gendering and transforming woman-focused services (Department of Health, 1993; 2004, 2007; NHS England, 2016; 2017; see also: Malouf et al., 2019).

However, the suggestion that mothers and midwives locate the same ideological and emotional space is increasingly contested. Research on doctor-patient and nurse-patient relationships highlights the incompatibility of gender-based service provider-user affiliations with professional hegemonies. These works suggest instead a mis-match between clients' gender-based expectations and practitioners' psychological defence against anxiety (Menzies, 1960; Obholzer and Roberts, 2003).

At a theoretical level, the idea that mothers and midwives are uniquely connected through a shared emotional connection has been vigorously attacked by Annandale and Clark (1996). Their post-structuralist analysis provides an authoritative critique of what they see as the essentialist gender-based alignment of mothers and midwives. As



they argue, the assumption that because mothers and midwives are biologically female they necessarily share common ways of seeing results in the conflation of a set of putative feminine ideals perpetuating an essentialist myth of womanly sameness (and difference from men). Further, in conceiving power as 'male', it glosses over the way that women may exert power, including over other women (Bowes and Domokos, 1998; Fink and Lundqvist, 2010). Annandale and Clark's position is supported by Foucauldian analysis, which questions the unique pairing of gendered discourses of empowerment with midwifery (and medicalised discourses of control with medicine), highlighting the ways in which normative discourses may operate across gender categories (Arney, 1982; DeVries and Barroso, 1997; Pitt, 1997; Williams, 1997). Drawing on documentary analysis (Arney, 1982) and oral history methods (Pitt, 1997) they expose the fluid nature of professional discourses, suggesting that midwives, like their medical counterparts, may draw on 'male/medical' discourses (which prioritise 'science', 'rationality' and birth as 'normal in retrospect') and 'female/midwifery' discourses (which valorise 'femaleness', 'nature', 'intuition' and birth as 'natural') and caution against:

arguments about the 'male take over' of childbirth [which] need to be framed *very carefully* .... professionals of both sexes need to consider how their *practices set up particular relationships of power with the pregnant woman*.

(Pitt, 1997: 228–9, *my emphasis*)

However, absent from these accounts is an empirically drawn analysis of the ways in which these relationships are managed in practice, including how cultural, professional and institutional discourses and forms of knowledge are invoked, embraced and resisted in the routine interactions between mothers and midwives.

In order to answer these questions, a more sophisticated methodological approach capable of capturing and analysing everyday interaction, including its often-overlooked visual dimension (Jewitt, 2009), is required. Such a methodology is provided by the theoretical and analytical framework of ethnomethodological CA (Sacks et al., 1974). CA is a well-established approach to the study of talk-in-interaction which, through an analysis of the detailed organisation of people's talk, and increasingly their gaze and posture (Ruusuvuori, 2001; Heath et al., 2010), makes visible the everyday methods that people use to make and share meaning. More particularly, CA's focus on 'ethnomethods' (people methods) (Garfinkel, 1967) makes explicit the ways in which social order is accomplished through 'talk-in-interaction' (Schegloff, 1968). As Antaki and Widdicombe (1998:1) elaborate, 'social life is a continuous display of people's local understandings of what is going on', an activity which is accomplished by their 'elegantly exploiting the features of ordinary talk'. In this way, institutional priorities, identity categories, norms and values are viewed, not as independent of members' practical action, but as embedded in and accomplished through body language and speech. A focus on the co-ordinated, turn-by-turn interaction reveals how participants themselves produce and make relevant these meanings.

Within psychology, these analytic concerns have been taken up by scholars of identity, including feminist scholars (Kitzinger, 2000; Speer, 2005; Speer and Stokoe, 2011), in their elaboration of the value of CA for making visible the ways in which identity is constructed in everyday interactions and, increasingly, in health and social care encounters (Finlay et al., 2008; Land et al., 2017), adding to the body of sociologically informed CA in this field (Heath, 1986; Drew and Heritage, 1992; Have, 2001; Heath and Hindmarsh, 2002; Heath et al., 2010; ). Within this body of work, Kitzinger's (2000) feminist CA provides an empirically drawn critique of essentialist feminist perspectives on gender-based identity, helping to shift academic feminism away from the binary thinking which constructs such differences as a priori natural facts. As she explains:

Rather than seeing language use as marking a gender ... identity which exists prior to the act of speaking, we can understand language use as one way of understanding identity ... Instead of 'how do women and men talk differently?' we can ask *how particular forms of talk contribute to the production of people as 'women' and as 'men'*.

*Kitzinger (2000: 70, my emphasis)*

In articulating gender identities as locally and sequentially accomplished, Kitzinger's work has resonance for feminist understandings of the mother–midwife relationship which are premised on assumptions of empowerment and sameness. Rather than seeing such categories as pre-existing, it is possible to explore how participants themselves orient to their statuses as women, mothers, midwives, and so forth, and how these identities might be produced (displayed, encouraged, refused and resisted) in their situated interactions. While much of this foundational work in CA was focused on talk, the primary data being almost exclusively derived from audio-taped recordings of 'naturally occurring' speech, the development of increasingly sophisticated digital technologies and their affordances for recording body movement and speech has fuelled interest in psychology and the social sciences in the generation and systematic analysis of multimodal and visual forms of meaning making (Jewitt, 2011; Hammond, 2013). As Goodwin (2001) elaborates:

A primordial site for the analysis of human language, cognition and action consists of a situation in which multiple participants are attempting to carry out courses of action together while attending to each other, the larger activities that their current actions are embedded within and relevant phenomena in their surround. *Vision can be central to this process. The visible bodies of participants provide systematic, changing displays about relevant action and orientation.*

*(Goodwin, 2001:157, my emphasis)*

The development of increasingly sophisticated video technology, including video data-handling packages which assist in the analysis of seen phenomena (gaze, facial expression, eye-movement and gesture), has advanced research practice in this area, enabling analysts to attend to the significant role of the visual in mediating talk and

activity, including in the co-constitution and display of understanding, disagreement and resistance and emotional stance (cf. Ruusuvuori, 2001; Finlay et al., 2008; Silver and Patashnick, 2011; Nevile, 2015; Kaukomaa et al., 2015)

### **Research questions and methods**

The aim of this chapter and underpinning empirical research is to elaborate the potential of video-based methodology for understanding the interactional accomplishment of social identity. Drawing on the theoretical and analytical framework of video-based conversation analysis (VCA), the research aimed to explore how particular normative professional and patient identities are accomplished locally and sequentially through midwives' and mothers' talk and visual orientation (gaze, facial expression and gesture). The fieldwork, which involved video-taping routine home visits and hospital-based postnatal consultations, generated over 30 hours of video-tapes of 22 mothers and 17 midwives (Lomax, 2013).

The chapter presents both an analysis of mother–midwife interaction and, alongside this, a reflexive examination of my own position and that of the video camera in the generation and co-construction of knowledge. In making these processes visible, my intention is to contribute to a body of scholarship in psychology which rejects the 'God's eye' view of social research that it is possible and desirable to capture data uncontaminated by the research process (Haraway, 1988). Instead I elaborate a reflexive epistemology which makes visible participants' 'noticings' of the camera/researcher as informative of the situated interactional work of participants (Lomax and Casey, 1998). Before I discuss this I will briefly describe the methods of data transcription and analysis.

### **Transcription and analysis**

Data was transcribed and analysed according to the system developed within CA which continues to evolve and encompass visual interaction (Goodwin, 1981, 2001; Heath, 1986; Heath et al., 2010; Land et al., 2017). Within the chapter, excerpts from the video-tapes are presented as transcribed sequences of body movement, speech and gaze, following closely the original video-taped interaction of the participants. In accordance with CA conventions, data is presented, not as isolated utterances but as sequences of talk which display the sequential, turn-by-turn accomplishment of interaction, the primary unit of analysis within CA.

Within the transcripts, midwives are represented as 'M', mothers as 'C' and myself as 'H'. In order to differentiate readily between the two principal speakers, midwives' utterances are presented in bold format and lines of transcribed talk are numbered for ease of referencing. For clarity, visual data is presented in one of three forms. In the interests of brevity and lucidity, I have indicated eye and body movement by describing it in parentheses on the verbal transcript. Elsewhere I have used aspects of the system devised by Goodwin (1981) and modified by Heath (Heath, 1986; Heath et al., 2010), in which visual elements are mapped on to the verbal transcript according to where they occur in relation to speech and silence.

As the data extract 7.10 displays, the gaze of the current speaker is transcribed above the talk and that of the co-participant beneath it. A description of the symbols used is contained at the end of this chapter. Additionally, still photographs from the video are used to illustrate analytic points concerning the respondent's gaze and body movement. Their relationship to the talk is indicated with captions from the transcript.

### **The camera never lies? Video-based methods and reflexivity**

It is inconceivable that an ethnographic film could be made in such a way that it did not distort or alter or select its images of reality in a myriad of ways. Therefore, *it gets us nowhere to ask if a film is subjective, or if it distorts reality. The answer to both questions has to be yes.*

*(Heider, 1976:49, my emphasis)*

This section draws attention to aspects of the management of video-taping and specifically, participants' orientation to the video camera and to me as the researcher during live filming. In focusing on a small number of sequences in which participants either commented directly on the camera's presence or invited my participation at specific episodes in the visit, my aim is to challenge polarised arguments about the artificiality and 'naturalness' of video-based data (Barriage and Searles, 2019; Heath et al., 2010). As Speer and Hutchby (2003:333) argue, 'the presence of a recording device' is frequently deemed as jeopardising the 'normalcy, naturalness and authenticity' of data, distorting and invalidating any findings. An alternative approach seeks to minimise participants' reactivity, claiming, for example, that participants become used to, or cease to notice the researcher/camera, so producing 'natural' data (Laurier and Philo, 2006). In fact, neither position is tenable, being derived, as Willig (2001) suggests, from an erroneous belief that researchers can somehow stand above the research. An alternative to this 'God trick' is for researchers to:

reflect upon their own standpoint ... and to attempt to identify the ways in which such a standpoint has shaped the research process and findings.

*(Willig, 2001:7)*

Within video-based research this may be pursued through a systematic analysis of the ways in which research participants themselves respond to the video-based research process (Lomax and Casey, 1998). From this reflexive perspective, video-based data is seen as a product of both the technologies used (the choice of camera, microphone etc.) and the processes of its production (the researchers' and participants' decisions about how and what may be filmed). From this reflexive epistemological position, the video record is conceptualised as far from neutral; 'every video factually encloses constructive aspects (or "footprints") of those operating the camera' (Schnettler and Raab (2008:12); and as such, transparently available for analysis.

However, whilst this argument is theoretically compelling, how to practically manage this fact was something I had not fully anticipated at the outset of this research. Although, within the wider social science literature, reflexivity is encouraged and advocated as an important means of situating qualitative approaches (Gough, 2017; Lumsden, 2019), the theoretical legacy of ethnomethodological video-based CA and positivist tradition is such that the ways in which data is collected are frequently overlooked (although see Laurier and Philo, 2006; Speer and Hutchby, 2003; Barriage and Searles, 2019 for important exceptions). Rather, that which is available strongly suggests that researchers maintain a low profile in order to avoid contaminating the data (Heath, 1986).

From this perspective, I had little to draw on when presented with research participants who, despite my efforts, responded to and commented upon the experience of being video-taped and did so, visually, audibly and on camera. Not only did these experiences necessitate me having to re-think how to manage my presence and that of the recording equipment, they also rapidly disrupted the idea that data can be extracted, pristine from the social world (Harper, 1998). Rather, I was immediately confronted with the empirical evidence that video-taped data is both technologically and socially mediated. This is exemplified in the following sequence (data extract 5.11), in which the mother, ‘Hilary’, invites a response from me about the noisy fish tank at line 1 (Table 12.1).

Whilst initially I felt uneasy about this sequence, unable to shake off the view that such examples are evidence of data contaminated by the research process, I began to systematically explore where and in what form participants sought to

Table 12.1 Community midwife and Hilary (S27)

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		(30.0) ((midwife’s gaze is oriented to the paperwork on her lap; she is writing in the notes))
		((mother starts to smile))
1	C	(You’ll be looking at this) and saying what’s
2		that noise in the background on that video
		((mother looks over at fish tank))
		[
3	<b>M</b>	<b>yes it’s the fish tank in’ it</b>
4	C	Ahahah (you’ll be goin’) *what’s=
		[ ]
5	<b>M</b>	<b>(that’s) noisy in it</b>
6	C	=that noise* ahaaha
7	H	Aha
		((Midwife resumes note writing. Mother continues smiling to herself))
		(4.5)
8	<b>M</b>	<b>*Right then so:*</b> ((murmured to self))
		[ ]
9	H	They’re tropical aren’t they?
10	C	‘Aven’t got a clue

---

elicit my involvement and what this might mean for the validity of the data and for the analysis as a whole. This analysis was enlightening. It became apparent that mothers (and midwives less frequently) invited me to take part in the interaction (for example, by gazing in my direction or making a specific comment about the camera) in those parts of the visits where interaction with the midwife was temporarily suspended, notably, when midwives were observably otherwise engaged in recording the clinical details of the visit in the mother's notes. This is clearly evident in extract 5.11, in which the mother's initial utterance at line 1: 'You'll be looking at this and saying what's that noise in the background on that video' is embedded in an interactionally lengthy period of silence (30 seconds) during which the midwife is visibly occupied writing in the mother's notes and during which the mother, immediately prior to her utterance, can be seen gazing into the middle distance (illustrated in video fragment 5.4: Figure 12.1). Following this 30-second pause, the mother can be observed to smile, glance briefly at the midwife and, finding her gaze unmet, issue a remark about the noise that the fish tank is generating. Initially the midwife responds to the mother's utterance, briefly breaking off from her paperwork activities to comment about the fish tank ('yes it's the fish tank in' it') in lines 3 and 5 (and which I also acknowledge with a laugh at line 7 in response to the mother's shift in gaze and laughter at line 6). A pause of 4.5 seconds then follows, during which the midwife resumes her record-keeping activities and the mother adopts a middle-distance gaze while continuing to giggle quietly. The mother's continued visible amusement combined with a further gaze in my direction produces a verbal response from me at line 9 ('They're tropical aren't they?'), to which the mother immediately responds, generating several turns of talk on the topic of her partner's fish-keeping.



*Figure 12.1* Video fragment 5.4: 'Noisy fish tank' (S27, 'Hilary'), from sequence 'You'll be looking at this and saying what's that noise in the background on that video'.

As I have argued earlier (Lomax and Casey, 1998), the mother's comment here (and my response) is interesting rather than contaminating. The mother's proffered topic at line 1 centres on a 'noticing' (Bergmann, 1990; Sacks, 1995), which is one means by which participants manage interactional unavailability and the social discomfort generated by the midwives' silence during clerical activities. While midwives may be observed, on these occasions, to be predominantly oriented to the paperwork, mothers, by contrast, may be seen to be gazing at a non-gazing recipient, a situation which is 'dis-preferred' in the normative order of conversation (Goodwin, 2001). However, where I am also present, a dis-preferred silence can develop in that potential speakers are unaccountably silent, a situation which the mother resolves through gazing and speaking activities which solicit my interactional involvement. In other words, these sequences can be understood as a means by which mothers (and researchers) manage interactional awkwardness.

This analysis is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it makes explicit the ways in which the research process inevitably intrudes upon the activities of research subjects, demonstrating that these activities are part of, and attentive to, the interactional requirements of the setting. In this way, rather than interpreting researcher involvement as inevitably contaminating, analysis demonstrates that it is both necessary, in terms of maintaining fluent social interaction but also transparently available on the video-tape for inspection. Secondly, analysis of these sequences makes visible the significance of other-directed gaze as it is made subtly relevant in the minutiae of mothers' and midwives' interaction. Systematic analysis of sequences which are characterised by midwives' visual disengagement reveals occasions of interactional trouble in which mothers attempt to restore the normative order of conversation and midwives resist, prioritising a consultation format scripted by clerical activity and choreographed by visual inattention. The ways in which this game of (maternal) repair to a non-normative situation and (midwives') resistance is managed and its significance for the construction of professional and maternal identities is explored in the following section.

### **'Just the facts': birth stories, emotional asymmetries and institutional priorities**

Within the home visits midwives can be observed to accomplish a great deal of clerical work. Indeed, they have a professional responsibility to maintain records of care given and observations made (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2008). However, reading and writing in these documents present a potential dilemma in that midwives are unable to give mothers their full attention and maintain an interactional focus on the mother. One of the ways that midwives appear to manage this unavailability is to make explicit their lack of availability with comments about 'all this paperwork' and 'pieces of paper everywhere'. Additionally, they may invite mothers to talk about their recent birth experiences, a topic which is important to mothers (Dahlberg et al., 2016) and recommended as good practice in routine postnatal care (NICE, 2014; Baxter, 2019). However, as I illustrate, the management of this topic in this visually compromised context has

significant negative consequences for the format and content of mothers' contributions. Rather than presenting an opportunity for mothers to talk at length about their experiences, birth stories are uniformly short, scripted and rare. Less than a third ( $n = 9$ ) of the 30 consultations contain any reference to the mother's birth experience and all are less than three minutes in length. More particularly, they are dependent on an invitation by the midwife and located in particular typologies of consultation (the hospital discharge and first home visit) and at particular junctures. In the home visits this is universally in the first few moments of the consultation when the midwife is reading through the clinical notes. Although mothers may refer to their birth experiences at other locations in these consultations, these are barely acknowledged beyond a single utterance by midwives suggesting that stories are invited, not in response to mothers' needs but to perform a particular interactional function at these moments. The content, timing and flow of the story are strongly determined by midwives' control of the interaction and aligned to the accomplishment of midwives' clerical tasks. These constraints on the timing and structure of the story are such that mothers' birth stories do not become extended narratives. Rather, stories retain a largely question-answer structure in which the midwife asks the mother questions concerning, predominantly, clinical details about the delivery and the mother provides appropriate answers. While mothers may attempt to contextualise their answers and to describe the emotional context in which they gave birth and made decisions during labour, the asymmetrical nature of the discourse is such that this is largely undeveloped. This format is immediately evident in the opening sequence of Jenny's birth story (extract 7.10: Table 12.2 and Figure 12.2), which occurs in the first minutes of the first home visit by a midwife following Jenny's discharge from hospital. As such it exemplifies a typical birth story in this data.

As Jenny's story in extract 7.10 displays, the midwife's 'So:: it all went alright and you're quite relieved↑' invites the story. However, as the transcript and image 7.6 (Figure 12.3) reveal, the midwife's visual attention during the production of her invitation at line 61 is directed not at the mother but, non-normatively, at the

Table 12.2 Community midwife and Jenny (S8)

		(opening envelope)	(begins to shift gaze towards mother)
	M	-----	-----
61	<b>M</b>	<b>So:: it all went alright and you're quite relieved↑</b>	
	C	-----,-----	-----,-----
		(watching midwife open notes)	
		(shuffles across bed towards midwife, looking at notes)	
	C	-----,-----	
62	C	<u>Yes</u> I'm very relieved!	
	M	,----- (smiling)	
		(opening envelope)	
			[S8, home visit]





Figure 12.2 Video fragment 7.5: taken immediately before the production of 'So'(line 61); mother gazing at the midwife; the preferred engagement format in the normative order of conversation (S8, home visit).

envelope which she is simultaneously opening (indicated by – – in the transcript). As the CA literature makes clear, not looking at an addressee in this way is ordinarily dis-preferred. In mundane interaction it would generate dysfluency such as repetition or hesitation through which the co-speaker would seek to engage eye contact with the non-looking participant. However, the midwife, at this juncture, is minimally attentive to the normative order of turn taking. As the transcript reveals, moments before the completion of her utterance at the end of 'quite' she re-establishes eye contact with the mother (indicated by ... in the transcript) so that by the completion of her turn and the production of 'relieved' she is gazing at the mother, an activity which is required for smooth speaker exchange. In this way, her actions facilitate turn taking and maintain interaction, but they do so minimally. The mother, in response, actively displays co-operation in a number of ways. She answers the midwife immediately, which, is the preferred turn-construction (Sacks et al., 1974) and her answer is produced as an agreement which mirrors the midwife's in both emphasis and expression (repetition of 'relieved' and increase in pitch at the completion of the turn). In addition, the mother's co-operation is reinforced posturally. During the midwife's production of the invitation at line 61 she moves physically closer to the midwife and can be seen to align her gaze in response to the midwife's direction of gaze. This subtle shift in orientation is captured in Figures 12.2 and 12.3. Figure 12.2, taken immediately before the production of 'so', shows the mother gazing at the midwife while Figure 12.3 illustrates her postural and visual shift towards the paperwork on the midwife's lap. In this way, as the transcript and fragments display, the mother attends verbally and visually to the midwife's interactional initiative. On finding the midwife's gaze



Figure 12.3 Video fragment 7.6: taken from line 61 'it all went alright and you're quite relieved'. Mother aligning posturally and visually to the paperwork in a non-normative engagement frame in response to the midwife's visual and postural inattention (S8, home visit).

directed not at her, but at the paperwork, the mother, in a choreographed organisation of talk, posture and gaze, re-orientes her attention to the notes. However, she remains attentive to potential shifts in the midwife's direction of gaze, monitoring the midwife's movements in order to be able to perform the relevant next action (Sacks et al., 1974). In this way she can be seen to actively monitor her speech and activity, changing her visual orientation and bodily alignment in response to what she observes in the embodied action of midwives.

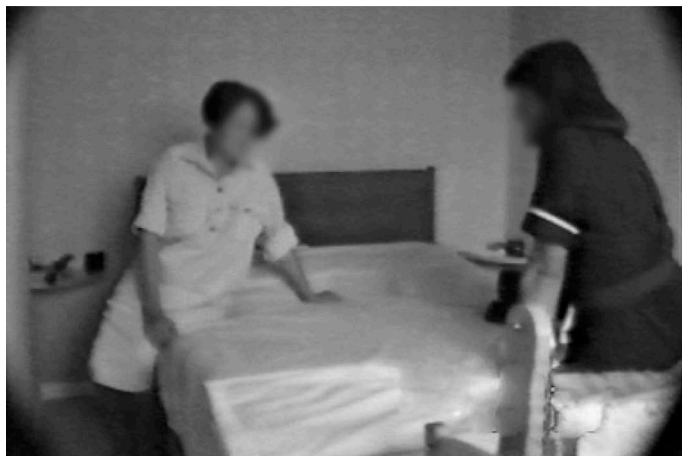
A further example of the significance of 'seen' aspects of interaction as powerful mediating factors and mothers' responsiveness in the context is illustrated in the following extract from Gail's story (Table 12.3). As with the previous example, this sequence displays the question-answer structure, preference for factual responses and visual asymmetries exemplified across the data set. As can be seen from the transcript, Gail, in response to the midwife's question at line 18 'So what time did you actually deliver in the end?', responds after a brief hesitation (in which she can be seen on tape to mimic 'remembering'). However, rather than focusing on the timing of events, as suggested by the midwife's question, Gail takes the opportunity to elaborate the emotional and embodied experience leading up to the birth. Specifically, her decision to remain at home for as long as possible and the difficult journey to hospital, a response which is unacknowledged in the midwife's determined questioning about the timing of events (lines 18-19; 21; 23-24; 29-30 and 33-34). As the transcript displays, this questioning does not acknowledge Gail's emotional and experiential contribution and, indeed, is interruptive of it, violating the turn-taking rule that only one speaker should speak at a time (Sacks et al., 1974). Rather, the midwife's question, at line 29, 'So what time did

Table 12.3 Gail (S20)

18	M	<b>So what time did</b>
19		<b>you actually deliver in the end?</b>
		(1.5)
20	C	(.h) Um:: (0.4) it was ten past eleven
		(1.1)
21	M	<b>Ten past eleven</b>
22	C	yeah
23	M	<b>So what time did you</b>
24		<b>actually go into hospital then?</b>
25	C	Well I left it a bit late I didn't -I wanted to leave it as late as I possibly could unfortunately probably just (.) aha
		[
26	M	<b>oh right right</b>
27	C	about managed to get there .h.h (.) I had a bit of a job sitting
28		down in the car getting in the car (0.4) but I didn't realise that
		[
29	M	<b>So what time</b>
30		<b>did you actually go in then?</b>
31	C	Um::
		(1.4) ((Mother looks down))
32		I can't remember
		[
33	M	<b>Cos I spoke to you I spoke to you about six</b>
34		<b><u>o'clock</u> (if you remember) yesterday didn't I</b>
		[
35	C	that's right

you actually go in then?' intrudes deeply into the internal structure of the mother's utterance to assert a factually oriented agenda concerning the precise timing of entry to hospital. Despite its interruptive status and lack of topical projection, Gail suspends her description in order to provide the required response, an activity which gives her some difficulty. As the transcript displays, her speech is noticeably 'dysfluent' (West, 1984), characterised by hesitations ('um') and a lengthy pause (1.4 seconds). This dysfluency is echoed and reinforced in the mother's body movement. Analysis of the video tape at line 31 shows Gail struggling to remember the time of admission. She temporarily suspends her visual alignment with the midwife, briefly looks down and makes a visual display of 'remembering', running her hands through her hair, an activity which culminates in the adoption of a middle-distance gaze away from the midwife (illustrated in video fragment 6.2: Figure 12.4), and her utterance, at line 32, 'I can't remember'.

In this way the midwife's verbal interruption results in a fractured non-normative engagement frame which shifts the story to a narrow clinical focus. Moreover, as with the previous example, the midwife's speech and activity, and the mother's associated visual and verbal acquiescence, re-assert the midwife's authority to steer talk and activity and mitigate the mother's efforts to provide a coherent account of her birth experience and Gail's account remains undeveloped.



*Figure 12.4* Video fragment 6.2: Gail (S20) breaking the visual engagement frame with the midwife and displaying ‘remembering’ in response to the midwife’s interruptive question at lines 29–30: ‘So what time did you actually go in then?’.

This asymmetry is seen across the data, whereby midwives maintain a factual questioning and mothers, attempt unsuccessfully to introduce experiential and contextual information about the birth. Mothers’ lack of success is attributable, in part, to the way in which the turn taking is allocated within the overall format of interaction. Talk is organised, asymmetrically, with midwives controlling the question–answer sequence (Have, 2001). Mothers’ positioning, within the turn-taking structure of talk as the recipient of questions, constrains them to talk on topic, providing appropriate answers to the midwives’ questions. By contrast, midwives’ control of the first position (as questioner) in talk gives them, conversely, the right to steer topic (Have, 2001) and mothers’ experiences remain largely unvoiced. Midwives’ visible orientation to clerical activities contributes to and reinforces these verbal asymmetries, making it difficult for mothers to assert their voices.

In a recurring pattern across the data set mothers can be repeatedly observed gazing at a non-gazing recipient. While in mundane talk this is often associated with interactional dysfluency, as speakers attempt to repair a situation in which the hearer appears not to be listening, this is observable in these visits as interactional ‘trouble’ (Jefferson, 1984). While studies of mundane conversation have demonstrated that this situation is usually successfully resolved by the speaker engaging in practices such as pauses or restarts in order to secure the gaze of a co-participant (Goodwin, 1981, 2001), this data indicates that this is managed instead in non-normative ways. Rather than correcting posture and aligning their gaze towards the mother, midwives continue to attend minimally to mothers (for example, at turn completion points) and mothers, in response, shift attention away from the midwife’s face towards the paperwork. Thus, in this way, and in order to

maintain co-operation and engagement with midwives, mothers can be seen to engage in practices which are ordinarily associated with interactional disengagement (i.e. non-looking at a co-speaker) but which in this context is the preferred engagement format. This is one of the ways in which mothers modify their talk and activity and a particular maternal identity which attends to midwives' definition of what is appropriate in this context is talked into being.

### **Summary and conclusion**

The aim of this chapter has been to explore the potential of a video-based methodology for the study of professional and patient identities as they are interactionally accomplished, including how professional discourses and experiential forms of knowledge are invoked, embraced and resisted in practice. As part of this my aim has been to attend to an on-going debate about the rigour and validity of video-based data and in which I have argued for an epistemological reflexivity. My reflexivity emerged out of the contingencies of field-work and, in particular, the need to both practically manage and account analytically for the research process as a social interaction. In this way, instead of putting aside sequences of interaction in which participants appeared to notice the camera/me, I focused on systematically analysing these sequences in order to explore what had been accomplished by participants' talk and activity at these moments. In this I have sought to embrace video's unique capacity to preserve the ways in which participants respond to and negotiate the research process, exploring how their orientations to the video camera and to me are important elements of the research process and can provide critical analytic insight. As was discussed, this is illustrated with reference to the concept of 'other-directed gaze', which is an important means by which subjects co-ordinate entry into talk, signal enthusiasm for and manage topic closure (Ruusuvuori, 2001). Correspondingly, as I have explored in this data, the asymmetrical, question-answer format of birth stories is shaped by particular choreographies of talk and gaze through which midwives display, through their situated visual orientation and body alignment, the appropriateness of mothers' contributions. Mothers, in turn, use their own gaze to determine the appropriate next action in the bodies of midwives, actively changing the structure of their talk and bodily alignment in response to what they see. Mothers' responsiveness to midwives' interactional initiative in this context is an important means by which a clinically focused, partial birth story is initiated and maintained, power relations are mediated and professional and patient identities embodied.

By rigorously exploring such sequences, a reflexive approach, conceptually located within the analytic framework of CA, makes possible an analysis of the situated, visually mediated identity work of social actors as mothers, midwives and research participants in this context. In this way, the video record and analyses make explicit the significance of visual events such as other-directed gaze and the relevance of seen phenomena for the accomplishment of social action. The visual, but more specifically participants' embodied orientations to seen phenomena, is a powerful mediator of social action through which power relations are embodied and professional and patient

identities talked into being. Analysis of the situated talk and activity of mothers and midwives demonstrates the unique insight that video-based methods can offer.

As the chapter has explored, mothers and midwives' identity work is accomplished locally and sequentially through co-ordinated displays of speech, body movement and gaze. Their contributions are unequal and suggest different ways of seeing and knowing. Midwives on the one hand prefer to speak about birth as a medical event focused on timing and clinical details, while mothers attempt to speak about birth as an embodied, emotional journey. Midwives, as hearers of mothers' stories, display and encourage through their situated use of body alignment, speech and gaze the appropriateness of mothers' contributions in this context, preferring responses from mothers which have a narrow clinical focus and an engagement frame which is co-operative but which has the printed page as its focal point. Mothers are attentive to the interactional order imposed by midwives and, while they can be observed to momentarily resist and attempt to reinstate an interactional format in which speech, body movement and gaze are more symmetrically organised in order to make explicit the emotional and experiential aspects of birth, they are largely unsuccessful. Rather, as the visual analysis elaborates, mothers are relatively powerless in this context. Midwives' commitment to non-normative engagement frames, coupled with their professional record-keeping responsibilities, results in a fractured, clinically oriented birth story and consultation which are problematic for theoretical and policy positions which privilege the gender-based alignment of mothers and midwives.

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### Transcription notation

<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
M	Midwife
C	Mother
H	Researcher
[]	Overlap in speakers' talk
(0.5)	Pause in speech, in this case of 0.5 seconds
(.)	Pause of less than one-tenth of a second
-	No pause between speakers
=	Used at the beginning or end of a new line to indicate continuous speech
word	Speaker's <u>stress</u> on a word or phrase
*Word*	A quietly spoken word or phrase
(word)	Transcriber's uncertainty about what was said
wo::rd	Extension of the sound preceding the colon (the more colons the longer the sound)
word↑	A rise in intonation occurring in the sound preceding the symbol
((raises head))	Contains transcriber's description
_____	A single continuous line above transcribed speech indicates that the person is gazing at the face of the co-participant
,,,,,,,,,,	A series of commas above transcribed speech indicates that a participant is turning away from a co-participant
_____	Indicates that a participant is looking at an object other than the co-participant. The object is described above or below the symbol
.....	Participant is turning towards the co-participant

# 13

## METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR VISUAL RESEARCH ON INSTAGRAM

*Kayla Marshall, Kerry Chamberlain and Darrin Hodgetts*

Social media have become inextricably connected with social life, heavily mediating much of people's everyday social interactions (Hand, 2017). Given the often highly visual nature of social media, people are increasingly using visual information to construct their identities, express themselves, and communicate socially by, for instance, sharing selfies and snapshots of everyday life (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Psychologists have therefore become increasingly interested in examining visual content on social media, including photographs, videos, and other images, in order to understand the ways in which human identity work and social relations are increasingly mediated (e.g., how gender is enacted through social media) and mediatized (e.g., the function of social media in transmuting enactments of gender relations) (Livingstone & Lunt, 2014). However, the development of methodologies for visual research in social media spaces is still quite new and developing. The majority of social media research is not critical in nature and privileges quantitative 'big data' approaches to analyzing textual information (e.g., hashtags) and numerical information (e.g., number of 'likes') (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Most of this research is focused on aiding corporations and government entities to better understand consumer behavior and public opinion. In this chapter, we take a different, critical approach to illustrate how visual research on Instagram can be useful for understanding psychological phenomena, including the mediation and mediatization of gender identity politics.

The self-mediated nature of social media practices holds significant power to drive sociopolitical movements through, for instance, the subversion of images commonly presented in mass media (e.g., television, magazines), which are corporate-run and profit-driven, and which have been found to be responsible for normalizing processes of inequality. As we have demonstrated (Marshall, Chamberlain, & Hodgetts, 2019, 2020), gender-subversive images on the social media site Instagram have potential to

challenge hegemonic gendered representations that delegitimize and oppress feminine and queer identity formations in favor of the heteronormative.

Instagram is one of the most popular and most visual forms of social media. By June 2016, 95 million photographs a day were being posted on Instagram, and by late 2017, there were over 800 million active users (Balakrishnan & Boorstin, 2017). On Instagram, every post is centered around the presentation of a photograph, video, or other image, contextualized through captions, hashtags, and comments by other Instagram users (Laestadius, 2017; Marwick, 2015). These pictorial artefacts become focal points for social exchange through which gender relations come into play. However, Instagram has rarely been addressed as a site for visual research, including for visual research in psychology. This is due in large part to the assumption that the overwhelming amount of images on Instagram renders it a more suitable site for quantitative big data approaches, rather than qualitative 'small data' approaches (Hand, 2017). While big data approaches tend to focus on the general practices of Instagram users, as represented through textual and numerical elements, qualitative small data approaches can help to understand specific psychological aspects of Instagram users. Instagram's visual and interactive nature makes it useful for examining self-presentation and expression, as well as online communication and everyday life, as mediated through images (Highfield & Leaver, 2015; Jang et al., 2015). In order to fully capitalize on Instagram's rich data, it has been argued (Highfield & Leaver, 2015; Laestadius, 2017) that researchers should make use of its visual imagery in combination with its textual elements like captions, hashtags, and comments. The tremendous popularity of Instagram, together with its rich visual data, unique format, customs, and conventions, calls for new and innovative methodologies which can combine visual and textual analyses (Highfield & Leaver, 2015).

This chapter draws on our research into bodybuilders on Instagram (Marshall, Chamberlain, & Hodgetts, 2018) as a basis for considering various methodological challenges and strategies associated with conducting visual research on Instagram. In this research, we employed visual narrative inquiry to understand how bodybuilders construct gender identities through visual narratives on Instagram regarding their bodies and bodybuilding practices. We were interested in how cultural expectations of femininity and masculinity, and the processes of gender inequality that they serve to reinforce, are (re)produced and problematized through the bodily practices and self-representations of bodybuilders on Instagram. Also of interest was how these practices and representations are governed through surveillance by others on Instagram, who express approval and disapproval by commenting on the often counter-hegemonic images posted by bodybuilders. We begin with a discussion of strategies for collecting visual data on Instagram, before moving on to discuss strategies for analyzing visual content on Instagram. Then, we present a case study of our visual narrative inquiry into bodybuilders on Instagram, and discuss how we addressed various methodological challenges throughout our own research processes.

## **Collecting visual data on Instagram**

There are currently billions of images on Instagram. Visual researchers engaging with Instagram are confronted with novel problems regarding the scope, scale, and selection of images (Hand, 2017). Generally, qualitative research focuses on relatively small samples in order to adequately examine information in depth (Boyd & Crawford, 2012). However, this strategy leaves researchers open to criticism from those with an empiricist mindset who propose that it is difficult to guarantee that a sample collected on Instagram accurately reflects its relevant population. Such thinking helps to explain why quantitative big data approaches to social media research have taken precedence over small data qualitative approaches (Boyd & Crawford, 2012; Highfield & Leaver, 2015). These quantitative methods offer the allure and illusion of broad generalizations about Instagram users and practices (Carah & Shaul, 2016). If one is not concerned by the baggage of empiricist notions of representative sampling and generalization, and instead is interested in theoretical and referential forms of generalization (Hodgetts et al., 2020), then analyses of smaller research corpuses of Instagram posts can be extremely valuable for extending our knowledge of specific social practices and interactions among particular subpopulations on Instagram. Below, we consider how a research corpus can be compiled for qualitative visual research on Instagram.

Visual researchers using Instagram can develop a research corpus in several ways, including by using Instagram's application programming interface (API) or third-party tools that connect researchers to the API (Laestadius, 2017; Mayr & Weller, 2017). While these methods can be expedient and flexible, we argue that extracting data manually from the Instagram application (e.g., on a smart phone) is a better option for qualitative projects focused on engaging with the visual (Laestadius, 2017). This forces researchers to engage with individual images, their captions, hashtags, and comments in the ways that posters intended. This better equips researchers to understand the complex meanings of posts, including some indication of posters' intentions, often represented in the captions they post, and how other Instagram users actually experience the posts, often represented in the comments on posts.

The most common and valuable strategy for manually locating data on Instagram is to conduct a search of hashtags commonly used by the group being studied (Hand, 2017; Highfield & Leaver, 2015). Searching a hashtag on Instagram generates a list of every publicly accessible post containing that hashtag. Unlike Twitter, where hashtags indicate posts associated with a particular conversation (Bruns & Burgess, 2012), hashtags on Instagram are more likely to indicate a particular community (Laestadius, 2017). Instagram users include certain hashtags in their posts not only to contextualize and give meaning to their posts (Solis, 2011), but to integrate themselves into a community and to ensure that their posts can be located by other members of that community (Oh et al., 2016; Postill & Pink, 2012). In other words, hashtags provide some clues to the meanings of posts in addition to the users' participation in, and desire to interact with, other members of a particular community share a space, topic interest, as well as social practices and identity formation (Baym, 2015). For these reasons, finding posts through

hashtag searches can be extremely useful for fast and direct location of relevant material for analysis, and for ensuring that these reflect the actions of the group being studied (Hand, 2017).

Further, due to the massive amount of images on Instagram, researchers may need to narrow down their selection of posts according to some geo-temporal criteria, such as images posted within a particular month, or images linked to a particular location (Hand, 2017). Posts on Instagram generated by a hashtag search are listed in chronological order with the most recent at the top. This can aid visual researchers in compiling datasets by limiting the posts they view by time. Additionally, researchers can collect data by searching certain geographic locations on Instagram (Laestadius, 2017). Instagram users have the option of including a link in their posts indicating the location associated with the post (e.g., where the photograph in a post was taken); by clicking on this link (or by searching by location), Instagram generates a list of all posts containing a link to that location.

Hence, it is wise to preserve the contextual meaning of posts by manually collecting data through Instagram's user interface. Additionally, researchers can utilize the hashtag and location links included in posts to make data collection relatively quick and easy and to ensure that their research corpus accurately reflects the group they are studying. Next, we focus on strategies for analyzing images and text on Instagram. This requires careful consideration of the specific ways that people share information on Instagram, and an awareness of how this information is curated, idealized, and mediatized.

### **Analyzing visual data on Instagram**

The analytic strategies for visual research on Instagram discussed below revolve around three key issues. First, in order to discern the meaning of images on Instagram, it is important for researchers to consider the unique technologies, customs, and sociocultural factors that influence how Instagram users produce, display, and engage with their own and other people's imaging practices (Hand, 2017; Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Second, it is important that researchers analyzing posts on Instagram bear in mind that content on Instagram is highly curated and self-mediated; researchers should never treat Instagram images as though they are windows into an objective reality. Third, researchers should consider how, like all social media, Instagram has led to a blurring of traditional boundaries between media production, distribution, and reception (Gauntlett, 2011). People today are no longer consumers but prosumers of mass media, participating in both consumption and production, including through the reproduction, refinement, and mediatization of visual culture. This poses major challenges for visual researchers who must move beyond traditional approaches to media as entities which are primarily top-down and profit-driven in their power and influence (French, 2014).

To highlight the key issues for analysis of Instagram posts, we consider it useful to discuss analysis strategies within three key sites where the meanings of images are made. Reflecting earlier scholarship on the circuit of mass communication (Miller, Kitzinger, & Beharrel, 1998), Rose (2012) proposes that the meaning of an image

manifests at three different levels. These levels include: (1) the site of image production, which includes the technologies, conventions, and sociocultural influences determining image production; (2) the site of the image itself, which includes its composition and characteristics; and (3) the site where the image is seen, which includes how the image is circulated, how the image may be interpreted and by whom, and the potential effects of the images.

### ***The site of image production***

Understanding *how* posts are produced on Instagram is crucial before researchers can interpret the composition and meaning of the images concerned (Baym, 2015, p. 74). An understanding of the specific ways that people create and contextualize images on Instagram is vital for understanding what they are doing, or trying to do, with the content they post.

It is important to first consider the text that accompanies images on Instagram. Captions are usually used to describe, or give meaning to, the images presented, and often articulate posters' thoughts, feelings, and intentions around posting the images (Hand, 2017; Laestadius, 2017). Further, researchers can consider how posters use hashtags in their captions to contextualize and classify their images. Instagram comments are extremely useful for interpreting the meanings and feelings that posts invoke in their audiences, especially since Instagram users can also respond to other users' comments on their posts. Analyzing these social interactions can be invaluable for researchers examining the psychological effects of social media and/or links between social media and broader cultural attitudes and practices.

In addition to including captions, hashtags, and comments on Instagram posts, users often post and view memes (Laestadius, 2017). The term 'meme' was coined by Dawkins (1976) and describes 'small cultural units of transmission that flow from person to person by copying or imitation' (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016). In the digital age, memes often come in the form of an image or photograph juxtaposed with text, and can also include text without images. Internet users have claimed memes as a way to display mundane, relatable, and often humorous cultural activities and attitudes. In addition to representing cultural norms, memes serve as a way for people to create and negotiate them (Shifman, 2014). Psychology researchers can use memes as indicators of cultural practices, attitudes, and opinions, and can consider how memes function, such as to build a shared sense of identity.

Researchers (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013; Whalen, 2009) see tremendous value in social media as sources for examining the everyday, previously private aspects of people's lives. After all, it is in the conduct of everyday life that social systems and cultural formations are reproduced, modified, and resisted (Hojholt & Schraube, 2015). However, it is important that Instagram researchers avoid any assumption that posting on Instagram is always instantaneous, spontaneous, and reflective of everyday lives. Content on Instagram, like all forms of social media, is highly curated, self-mediated, and idealized, with users being highly selective about the images they post (Highfield & Leaver, 2016).

'Selfies' have become ubiquitous on social media (Senft & Baym, 2015) and are heavily embedded within the culture of self-mediation and idealization on Instagram (Marwick, 2015). Selfies are photographs that people have taken of themselves and can be seen as part of a broader 'makeover culture' within which the body is situated as needing manipulation and improvement (Sheehan & Zervigon, 2015). Selfies are also part of the contemporary phenomenon whereby people are frequently engaging in visual self-expression for consumption by others, especially on social media (Hand, 2017). As Marwick (2015) argues, selfies are a 'genre unto themselves, with their own visual conventions and clichés' (p. 141). For instance, people commonly take selfies from above because the angle makes them appear thinner. It is also common for people to make the classic 'duck face' by pursing their lips to make their lips appear bigger. Psychology researchers can use Instagram posts containing selfies to understand how people express themselves, construct their identities, and communicate aspects of their own interests and lives with others. In doing so, it is important to keep in mind that selfies, like other forms of social media images, represent deliberate, self-mediated, and idealized performances, rather than who a person 'is' beyond Instagram (Frosh, 2015).

Once researchers have understood the unique ways in which materials are produced and displayed on Instagram, they can move to making sense of the composition of posts featuring images. This is the focus of the following section, where we discuss some of the challenges associated with analyzing these highly curated images and texts posted by Instagram users.

### ***The site of the image itself***

For psychologists, analyzing posts on Instagram should move beyond an analysis of what can literally be seen in images and text, to consider what posts implicitly represent and accomplish (Hand, 2017). For instance, psychologists interested in discerning the cultural meaning of posts on Instagram would need to consider the ways in which posters and their audiences negotiate the cultural meanings of posts. The complex nature of this pursuit is compounded by the polysemic nature of images on Instagram (Highfield & Leaver, 2016); images never exclusively represent and accomplish one meaning or another, and can represent and accomplish multiple meanings at once. The complexity involved in interpreting the meanings of Instagram posts is further compounded by the self-mediated nature of Instagram content; psychologists should consider the multiple, deliberate, and potentially conscious ways in which Instagram users (re)produce (and challenge) cultural notions (Frosh, 2015). Below, we discuss strategies for breaking down the polysemic and self-mediated nature of images on Instagram in order to assess their meanings and potential effects.

Rather than treating the polysemic and self-mediated nature of Instagram images as a disadvantage, we argue that psychologists can treat Instagram images like 'magnifying glasses' for understanding how Instagram users *want* to be perceived and understood. Psychologists can examine the deliberate ways in which people construct identities through their posts on Instagram. For example, given the highly

idealized nature of Instagram content (Marwick, 2015), psychologists can consider ways in which images posted by Instagram users represent their attempts to, or resistance to, conform to cultural expectations. In doing so, researchers can understand how cultural expectations influence people's identity constructions on Instagram, and how these might be challenged through deliberate acts of subversion. This means that psychologists should move beyond analyzing the compositional aspects of images on Instagram to consider what people are *intending to do* with the images they post – what their motivations are, whether to gain acceptance through conformity to cultural ideals, to challenge cultural ideals through nonconformity, or some other psychological motivation. This is in line with how anthropologists have long viewed the analysis of images – as manifesting primarily through how they are used rather than how they have been made (Edwards & Hart, 2004).

Another important strategy for breaking down the polysemic and self-mediated nature of Instagram images is to include analysis of their captions and hashtags (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Analyzing how Instagram users describe images through captions, and how they classify images through hashtags, can indicate how users represent themselves, and integrate themselves, and participate in particular Instagram communities. As an example, Laestadius, Wahl, and Cho (2016) tracked Instagram hashtags that were commonly used by electronic cigarette users in order to understand e-cigarette and vaping culture. They found that vape users on Instagram often integrate themselves into vaping communities by using hashtags like '#vapefam' and '#vapelife', and that they often fetishize and glamorize their use of vapes by using the hashtag '#vapeporn' and by posting appealing visual depictions of themselves vaping.

It is vital that psychologists conduct their analyses knowing that the meanings of images on Instagram are polysemic, self-mediated, and often idealized. Rather than treating these characteristics as a limitation, they can enrich analyses, allowing consideration of the ways people negotiate cultural notions through their self-representations. Involving captions and hashtags accompanying Instagram images enhances such analyses by pointing to the motivations, thoughts, and emotions associated with Instagram image use. In the next section, we discuss how visual and psychology researchers can analyze images on Instagram by considering the ways in which people react and respond to them.

### ***The site of the image's audience***

Unlike other online sites, such as Flickr, Instagram is not simply a hosting service for sharing photographs and images; visual information on Instagram serves a communicative purpose (Van Dijck, 2007) in that people use Instagram to connect and interact with others through images (Laestadius, 2017). For this reason, visual and psychology researchers using Instagram should also seek to discern the meaning of images in relation to the audiences viewing the images; they should analyze how Instagram users utilize images to communicate to their audiences, and how audiences respond to images on Instagram by following, liking, and commenting on them.



Instagram users often mediate and idealize their posts because they are motivated by the attention they receive for such posts in the form of followers, likes, and comments (Marwick, 2015). As Hand (2017) points out, it is primarily the amount of times an image is circulated on social media that ascribes it power, rather than its actual composition. Instagram users who attract the most likes, followers, and comments tend to appear conventionally attractive and rich, and tend to post about traditional status symbols like nice houses, luxury cars, and fit bodies (Marshall, Chamberlain, & Hodgetts, 2019; Marwick, 2015). Moreover, popular images on Instagram tend to emulate mass media images, and like mass media images, popular Instagram images often (re)produce cultural processes of power and can potentially produce psychological harm to those viewing them. For instance, young women are often compelled to conform to oppressive cultural expectations around the female form by posting photographs of their bodies in which they appear thin and toned. However, this can lead to heightened negative mood, body dissatisfaction, and diminished self-esteem among young women who post and view these types of images (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

When considering Instagram images and their potential effects on audiences, psychology researchers should keep in mind that Instagram users often post images in the hope that they will generate positive attention in the form of followers, likes, and comments, which often leads them to idealize the images they post. In these ways, Instagram users, the images they post, and the audiences who view them, can function to (re)produce cultural ideals as well as the processes of power which rely on those ideals.

Although the problematic aspects of idealized images on social media have received a relatively substantial amount of attention in psychological research (e.g., Haferkamp et al. 2012; Perloff, 2014; Wang, Yang, & Haigh, 2017), there has been less research on the potential for social media images to subvert and challenge cultural expectations, although such research has been growing (e.g., Murray, 2015; Seelig et al. 2019). For example, Cohen et al. (2019) examined the body-positive movement on Instagram, where Instagram users aim to challenge strict appearance ideals by posting images of diverse bodies of all shapes, sizes, colors, features, and abilities (readily found by searching the hashtags #bodypositive and #bopo, among others). Cohen et al. (2019) report that young women's exposure to body-positive content on Instagram improved their positive moods, body satisfaction, and body appreciation. Psychologists can address ways in which Instagram users actively negotiate cultural ideals, and how they can exert their power by subverting such ideals using their Instagram images. In the following section, we discuss our research into bodybuilders on Instagram to illustrate the issues of analysis discussed above.

### **A case study of bodybuilders on Instagram**

We open our case study with a discussion of visual narrative inquiry, the methodology we used in our research. We then outline our data collection processes, including how we addressed various challenges associated with collecting visual data on Instagram. Then, we discuss how we analyzed gendered meanings

associated with the Instagram posts of bodybuilders, which were negotiated through simultaneously idealized and subversive images (e.g., selfies, memes), how these images were described in their accompanying captions, and how they were reacted to by others.

### ***Visual narrative inquiry into bodybuilders on Instagram***

Psychologists have used visual narrative inquiry to identify and understand various aspects of human experience, including feelings, thoughts, motivations, and the construction of self and identity (Bach, 2007). Visual narrative inquiry is derived from narrative inquiry, and based on the notion that people are essentially story-telling beings, experiencing and understanding their lives through stories (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2009). A *visual* narrative is a story consisting of made or found images (Reisman, 2008); visual narratives may arise through the researchers or research participants creating images, or by the researchers or participants locating existing images, in order to express a particular narrative (Caine, 2010; Mattern et al. 2015; Reisman, 2008; Sairanen & Kumpulainen, 2014). Importantly, sociocultural discourses govern the possibilities and limitations through which people construct narratives (Clandinin, 2006). Researchers using visual narrative inquiry need to consider how images, including those on social media, are culturally framed and how they shape our narratives for how we see ourselves and how we see and interact with others. Researchers using visual narrative inquiry to understand human experience often consider the ways in which cultural norms and expectations can influence how people story themselves and others and, in doing so, exercise symbolic power (Hodgetts et al. 2020).

In our research, we were interested in how gendered cultural narratives regarding the body are (re)produced and challenged through bodybuilders' visual self-representations and interactions on Instagram (Butler, 1993). In particular, we wanted to contribute to scholarly debates regarding the gender-subversive potential of female and male bodybuilding. For instance, it has been argued that, by developing considerable muscularity, female bodybuilders challenge the cultural notion that women are naturally fragile and weak and that men are naturally stronger and more dominant (Edwards, Tod, & Molnar 2014; Rosdahl, 2014; Worthen & Baker, 2016). However, other feminist scholars have questioned the gender-transgressive potential of female bodybuilding (Bartky, 1998; Heywood, 1998), pointing to how female bodybuilders are encouraged to limit the size of their muscular development through disciplinary practices of femininity (Dworkin, 2001; Land, 2015), including ornamentation and sexualization (Gruber, 2007; Lowe, 1998; Obel, 2002). Additionally, male bodybuilders have long been argued to pursue large, muscular bodies as a way to evoke power and dominance over others (Klein, 1993; Swami & Voracek, 2013; Wamsley, 2007). However, because the male bodybuilder's body is judged exclusively on appearance rather than on functionality (e.g., strength), others have argued that male bodybuilding is an inclusive masculine practice which challenges the traditional assumption that appearance is a feminine and not

a masculine concern (Andreasson & Johansson, 2016; Bjornestad, Kandal, & Anderssen, 2014; Richardson, 2004). Like the female bodybuilders, the gender subversions of male bodybuilders may be compensated for by the strength and power that their muscularity symbolizes (Gill, Henwood, & McLean, 2005; Hobza et al., 2007; Ricciardelli, Clow, & White, 2010). One of the primary aims of our research was to bring light to these debates, and below, we outline how we accomplished this through visual narrative inquiry on Instagram.

### ***Data collection***

Studying these unique sub-groups, female and male bodybuilders, made it relatively easy to deal with the overwhelming amount of rich and complex visual data on Instagram. This narrowed down the number of profiles we could sample from, and made it easy to locate them. We began sampling profiles of bodybuilders by searching the general hashtag ‘#bodybuilding’ which, at the time of our research, generated around 80 million posts. This led us to identify that bodybuilders frequently use several other, more specific, hashtags, including ‘#girlswholift’, ‘#girlswithmuscle’, ‘#beastmode’, and ‘#shredded’. Such specific hashtags often indicate a poster’s consistent involvement in a particular Instagram community (Hand, 2017). These communities often have their own ‘insider lingo’, including unique hashtags (Baym, 2015). For this reason, most of the initial profiles we selected were located through searches of these more unique bodybuilding hashtags. Additionally, we sought to select profiles of bodybuilders who were active in the Instagram bodybuilding community at the time of research, as our focus was on contemporary ways in which dominant gendered discourses were being challenged and reinforced. As the posts generated by hashtag searches are listed in chronological order, it was relatively easy to select profiles of active users. Locating data by searching bodybuilding hashtags popularly used by Instagram bodybuilders was convenient, timely, and most importantly, ensured that our data reflected current Instagram practices of female and male bodybuilders.

Additionally, we sampled our initial set of profiles with the criteria that they were relatively popular, with at least 2,000 followers. We chose profiles with large followings for two important reasons. Firstly, bodybuilders with large followings have more comments on their posts. Since a primary aim of ours was to examine how other people enact gendered surveillance over the bodily practices of bodybuilders on Instagram by commenting on their posts, examining bodybuilders with large followings was key. To put things into perspective, as of 2014, almost 60% of Instagram posts did not contain comments, and posts with comments had an average of only 2.55 comments (Manikonda, Hu, & Kambhampati, 2014). The vast majority of Instagram comments seem to be reserved for posts on popular profiles. Secondly, we selected profiles of bodybuilders with large followings because their posts have more visibility and potential impact on those who observe their posts. This was important since we were interested in how the gendered practices of bodybuilders on Instagram might influence people’s understandings of gender and the body.

In total, we selected 50 initial profiles for female bodybuilders, and 50 initial profiles for male bodybuilders, and reviewed these profiles. Then, for our in-depth analyses, we selected 15 female bodybuilder and 15 male bodybuilder profiles, and examined these profiles in their entirety. We chose these specific profiles because they belonged to bodybuilders who posted daily or almost daily about their bodybuilding practices, which indicated that they were regularly active members of Instagram's bodybuilding community. These profiles had a range of around 2,000 to 3 million Instagram followers. Over the course of our analyses, we viewed over 5,000 posts, and analyzed over 500 of these posts in depth. Our data corpus for in-depth analyses included all images contained on each profile, the captions posted with these images, and the comments accompanying these images.

Our search and selection of bodybuilder profiles on the basis of recent use of general and specific bodybuilding-related hashtags ensured that we examined profiles of bodybuilders that represented contemporary ways that bodybuilders are challenging and/or reinforcing heteronormative notions of the body on Instagram. Additionally, our decision to select profiles with large followings ensured that our data was relevant to two other aims of our research: to examine how people respond to and govern the gendered practices of bodybuilders on Instagram, and the potential impact of these practices.

### ***Analysis***

In this section, we discuss how we used the images (e.g., selfies, memes) and captions posted by bodybuilders on Instagram to understand how they negotiate cultural expectations of gender and construct gendered narratives on Instagram. We also discuss how we used the comments that bodybuilders receive on their Instagram posts to understand how other people perceive and react to their bodily practices, and to consider how these comments might influence the gendered narratives presented by bodybuilders on Instagram.

A major component of our analyses lay in determining the extent to which, and the ways in which, bodybuilders depict their bodies as resembling, or not resembling, idealized versions of women's and men's bodies. For instance, we examined the selfies that female bodybuilders post, and quickly understood that their posts simultaneously conform to and subvert dominant cultural images of the female body. While their muscular bodily displays often counter the expectations that women's bodies represent weakness and subservience, their bodies were also often heavily sexualized as well as ornamented with jewelry, makeup, and styled hair, which are feminine expectations that objectify and ultimately marginalize women (Bartky, 1998; Bordo, 2004). This phenomenon is well illustrated in a post (Figure 13.1) by one of the female bodybuilders we observed, in which she displays her own body next to that of a runway model.

While this female bodybuilder appears much more muscular than the runway model, their bodies are similarly feminized through ornamentation. Drawing from theory and past research (e.g., Bartky, 1998; Choi, 2003), we argued that the gender conformity practiced by these female bodybuilders functions to compensate



Figure 13.1 An Instagram post by a bodybuilder showing herself next to a runway model, which illustrates the feminization of her muscularity

for their feminist resistance to a degree, because their images function to reposition their bodies as more objectified and passive and less strong and powerful. However, examining and analyzing the captions accompanying these selfies was extremely important for enriching this rather simplistic analysis, as discussed below.

Examining the captions accompanying the selfies and other images posted by bodybuilders on Instagram allowed us to discover a variety of important, albeit implicit, complexities and nuances inherent in the seemingly ‘contradictory’ gendered narratives presented by bodybuilders on Instagram. For example, we found that, rather than aiming to counteract their muscularity and strength through conformity to feminine expectations, female bodybuilders on Instagram actively *associate* their strength with their femininity. In captions, these female bodybuilders often acknowledged that they are feminine *and* strong – they often argued that these two concepts are not, and should not be, mutually exclusive. These female bodybuilders often took control of the ‘contradictory’ gendered narratives they present through the images they post of themselves, by openly challenging the cultural assumption that women cannot be strong and empowered as well as feminine. This was the main finding in our research on female bodybuilders; captions were crucial for providing the information we needed to understand and conceptualize how female bodybuilders display femininity while simultaneously preserving their evocations of strength and empowerment.

Referring to image captions was also vital for understanding the gendered narratives presented by male bodybuilders on Instagram. These also seemed contradictory at first, but were more challenging to analyze because, unlike the female bodybuilders whose profiles we analyzed, none of the male bodybuilders openly expressed awareness on Instagram of the gendered cultural norms underlying their bodybuilding practices. In our research with male bodybuilders, we often had to refer to a mix of data components (selfies, other images, captions, and comments) to understand their narratives and reach conclusions. For instance, during our preliminary analyses, we observed that male bodybuilders often post photographs of themselves standing next to socioeconomic status symbols, such as



*Figure 13.2* An Instagram post by a bodybuilder in which he simultaneously flaunts his muscular body and motorcycle

expensive cars, and that they are often flaunting their muscularity in such posts. This is exemplified in a post (Figure 13.2) by one of the male bodybuilders in our study, in which he is standing shirtless next to a motorcycle.

Additionally, in the captions of their selfies, and in some memes they posted, male bodybuilders often described muscular bodies as status symbols that represent the self-control necessary for achieving socioeconomic success. We also identified other captions in which male bodybuilders expressed distress over how difficult it is to achieve today's (hegemonic masculine) standards of wealth. Collectively, these findings led us to conclude that male bodybuilders on Instagram are often motivated to build their muscularity because muscular bodies act as status symbols, allowing them to negotiate hegemonic masculine standards around wealth, status, and prestige. This analytic process indicates that it is often essential to jointly analyze a wide variety of images and captions on Instagram profiles and to critically explore their common themes (e.g., socioeconomic status, muscularity) in order to draw conclusions that reflect the complex practices involved.

We also found that analyzing the memes posted by bodybuilders on Instagram was very useful for enriching our understanding of their gendered narratives. To illustrate, we observed that several male bodybuilders posted anti-feminine and homophobic memes associating femininity and homosexuality with weakness. For instance, one of the male bodybuilders in our study posted a meme featuring a photograph of a male bodybuilder performing an exercise with a 'spotter' juxtaposed with another photograph of two gay men caressing. A spotter is someone who stands very closely to someone performing an exercise with heavy weights in case they need assistance. The meme also features text that reads, 'Squatting with a spotter. HOW IT LOOKS [versus] HOW IT FEELS'. The meme insinuates that if a man needs a 'spotter' while exercising, then he is weak and therefore 'gay'. Observing memes such as this one was useful since we rarely observed blatantly homophobic and anti-feminine sentiments in the captions of the male bodybuilders' Instagram posts. This may arise because bodybuilders are more likely to feel comfortable expressing such sentiments through memes; a meme is often (re-)circulated by many people and it is rarely known who

actually created the meme. We argued that these memes reflect and (re)produce anti-feminine and homophobic sentiments among the male bodybuilding community on Instagram. We followed arguments from past research that male bodybuilders express anti-feminine and homophobic sentiments as a way to bolster their hegemonic masculine positions (Klein, 1993; Rubin, 2003). Additionally, we argued that the male bodybuilders we observed are motivated to build their muscularity in part because this enables them to embody socioeconomic success in the face of unrealistic cultural standards of masculine wealth (Meisenbach, 2010; Rosenmann et al., 2018). As this example illustrates, memes proved a useful way to enhance our understandings of the cultural attitudes, practices, and opinions shared among male bodybuilders on Instagram, as these were not as readily obvious in other components of our data, such as the captions.

Further, we found it important to analyze the comments made in response to the images and captions posted by Instagram bodybuilders to extend our understanding of how their gendered bodily practices are influenced by their audiences who react to these practices. For example, we found that others on Instagram were less likely to criticize, and considerably more likely to admire, the muscularity of female bodybuilders if it is minimal, ornamented, sexualized, and accompanied by little body fat. We argued that this operates as a form of surveillance that encourages female bodybuilders to engage in such bodily practices; together, these practices represent a form of (self-)surveillance that functions to (re)produce heteronormative cultural expectations of the feminine body, and that minimizes the feminist strength and empowerment that female muscularity symbolizes. However, female bodybuilders often inspire their audiences to admire, appreciate, and value their ‘feminine’ muscularity, as evidenced in the comments sections of their posts. Conversely, we found that the audiences of the male bodybuilders we observed do not impose such conditions; in fact, the more muscular the male bodybuilders appear, the more praise and admiration they receive. We argued that this surveillance functions to reinforce the male hegemonic power that muscularity traditionally symbolizes. We concluded that, overall, the differing ways in which female and male bodybuilders are encouraged to present gendered narratives on Instagram through displays and discussions of their bodies reflect and reinforce their respective positions within a patriarchal gender system. Just as cultural meanings of gender manifest through social interaction, so too do the gendered meanings of images on Instagram.

## **Conclusions**

As discussed in this chapter, methodologies for visual and psychological research on Instagram involve unique data collection processes and visual and textual analyses that take into account the specific format, technologies, and social practices associated with Instagram. Locating, observing, and manually collecting data through Instagram’s user interface preserve the unique context within which Instagram users post and view images. Additionally, selecting data through hashtag and location searches makes for quick and easy collection of data that accurately reflects the relevant group or topics being studied. Further, it is important for researchers to

understand the unique ways that Instagram users produce, display, and react to images on Instagram, including how they contextualize and give meanings to images through captions, hashtags, and comments, and how images are self-mediated and oftentimes idealized. Considering unique Instagram practices such as the sharing of selfies and memes can be especially useful for discerning the cultural meaning of images, including how they represent people's desire to conform to, or resist, cultural notions, and how they negotiate and (re)produce them. Instead of dismissing Instagram content as self-mediated, idealized, and therefore inaccurate, psychology researchers can take a similar approach to us by considering how Instagram posts magnify people's psychological processes, such as identity constructions, including their desire, or lack of desire, to align their identities with dominant cultural notions. Finally, visual and psychological researchers can refer to interactions in Instagram comments to understand how the meanings of Instagram images manifest through people's perceptions of, and reactions to, these images.

Our case study of research into bodybuilders on Instagram is offered as a concrete example of ways in which the above issues may be managed in research. In particular, our case study demonstrates how researchers can discern the cultural meanings of Instagram images by considering how people construct identities by curating these images in idealized and subversive ways, how these images are perceived and reacted to by people, and how cultural notions can be (re)produced and challenged through such interactions. Instagram is likely to be a popular site for further research by psychologists interested in examining contemporary cultural and psychological practices; this chapter offers some points for consideration as this research goes forward.

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# 14

## THE BIG PICTURE

### Using visual methods to explore online photo sharing and gender in digital space

*Rose Capdevila and Lisa Lazard*

#### **Introduction**

Selfies are now a well-established and routine part of daily life. This popular subgenre of everyday photography is visible in culture from music videos to advertising campaigns. Indeed, the selfie as part and parcel of common vernacular was marked in 2013 when it was proclaimed word of the year by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which defined the selfie as ‘A photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media’ (Selfie, 2013). However, in practice, the definition has extended to include group shots taken with mobile forward-facing camera technologies and the dictionary definition itself has worked its way into the burgeoning body of academic literature on the topic. This chapter explores selfie culture and photo sharing through the curation of women and girls’ online identities and the ways in which the visual has been taken up in research in this area. Using empirical examples from our own research on women’s engagement with photo-sharing practices online, we trace a path through the theoretical and methodological engagements in and outside of psychology and how these have informed and shaped our own uses of visual methods.

Our research takes an explicitly critical feminist intersectional approach to making sense of psychological phenomena. Both our theoretical and empirical work is underpinned by a rich scholarly tradition within feminist psychology which substantiates the prevalence of the unfavourable (mis)representation, if not pathologisation, of women, and in particular young women, within much of the psychological literature as well as in everyday discourse (Capdevila & Lazard, 2015). Within this tradition, our focus is on the exploration of minority understandings

of commonplace practices and experiences. Along with Gill (2011), we would argue that visual culture is critical to this sense making.

### **Women and the age of digital narcissism**

Central to our research on selfie culture is the interplay between gender and the selfie phenomenon. While the smartphone as a networked device has undoubtedly been instrumental in establishing selfie sharing online as a routine activity for many social media users, research suggests that women, particularly young women and girls, engage more often in these selfie practices. For example, in a 2015 survey, 115 out of a sample 117 (98%) US respondents aged 18 to 24 indicated that they had taken selfies, with 46% of this sample reporting that they had shared a selfie that day. Of this 46%, 31% reported that they posted selfies once or twice a day, with 69% posting between three and 20 times a day. Similar rates were found in a UK sample of 74 20–23-year-olds, with 71 out of 74 (96%) reporting that they took selfies, with approximately one-quarter suggesting that they had posted a selfie within the last 24 hours (Katz & Crocker, 2015). Noteworthy is that respondents in these surveys were disproportionately female, with young women comprising approximately two-thirds of the total sample.

Gendered and generational patterns around selfie-taking and sharing practices are resonant with the findings on generic social media usage. More specifically, research shows that women reportedly engage more frequently with both social networking sites (SNS) (Duggan and Brenner, 2012) and photo-sharing practices (e.g. Dhir, Pallesent, Torsheimd and Andreassend, 2016) than men. Data also suggests that young adults (aged 20–30) typically engage more frequently in selfie taking and sharing compared to older adults (Dhir et al., 2016).

The coming together of age and gender has been a concern in our work in the context of the predominant characterisation of ‘selfie culture’ as an expression of narcissism as well as concomitant links with mental health. The visual manifestation of self in selfies has been constituted in popular arenas as intensifying preoccupations with oneself and self-image which is heightened by editing facilities built into digital photographic technologies to create ‘best’ look (Capdevila & Lazard, 2017a). As Goldberg (2017) argues, the problematisation and criticism of selfie practices are located in the ways in which they are taken to both indicate and reproduce a toxic culture of narcissism which invites constant comparison and insecurity. Arguments around selfie toxicity suggest ‘a kind of compensatory self-obsession that requires the approval of others and is thereby pathologically beholden to them’ (p. 3). Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that links have been made in the press, as well as in other popular media, to lower self-esteem, depression and addiction. Since young women and girls engage in selfie practices more often than men, they are particularly subject to this form of pathologisation, social concern and disapproval. This is exemplified in Warfield’s (2014) claim that dominant media discourses characterise ‘selfies as narcissistic vanity rituals by (predominantly) vacuous teenage girls’ (p. 2).

Alongside the censure of young women's photo-sharing practices, mothers have more recently also become constituted in relation to digital narcissism. This has been aptly captured by the coining of the term 'sharenting'. In 2016, this term, defined as 'the habitual use of social media to share news, images, etc. of one's children' (Sharenting, 2016), earned a place in the *Collins Online Dictionary*. Note the use of the word 'habitual' in this definition. This use speaks to the pejorative function of the term to describe parental oversharing of child-focused images and content. Indeed, the practice of sharenting has been much maligned in the popular press as a display of narcissistic humblebragging about one's parenting achievements *vis à vis* children's accomplishments (Lazard et al., 2018). Whilst this portmanteau has the appearance of gender neutrality, studies suggest that, in a similar vein to gendered patterns around digital photo sharing mentioned earlier, it is mothers who share pictures of their children and family more frequently on social media than fathers (e.g. Ammari, Kumar, & Lampe, 2015; Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe, & Ellison, 2015). As such, it is mothers who are primarily subject to 'sharental' disapproval (Lazard et al., 2019).

### **Psychology and personality research**

Given the predominance of digital narcissism discourse in popular explanations of photo sharing, it is perhaps unsurprising that this has become reflected in a body of psychological studies on the phenomenon. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of 'selfie', for instance, has worked its way into the burgeoning body of academic literature on the topic. What is frequently less directly cited is the accompanying example of its usage: 'occasional selfies are acceptable, but posting a new picture of yourself everyday isn't necessary'. Whilst not explicit in the literature, the implication that the act of posting selfies is shaped by parameters of social acceptability reflects the frame within which research questions and methods are posited in much psychological research on the topic. These parameters, then, become constituted by conceptualisations which variously draw lines around modesty and vanity, with the latter dominantly psychologised as an indicator of narcissistic personality.

Within a context in which narcissism is predominantly understood to be 'a personality trait characterised by an inflated self-view and attempts to seek attention and admiration from others' (Weiser, 2015, p. 477), psychological research has tended to focus on the relationship between selfie posting and personality variables (e.g. Bergman et al., 2011; Etgar & Amichai-Hamburger, 2017; Hughes et al., 2012; Musil et al., 2017) as well as their relationship to mental health (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). For example, McCain et al.'s (2016) study suggested that the Dark Triad – which refers to the personality traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy – were positively correlated to selfie-taking frequency.

Similarly, in an online survey with 1248 US-based participants, Weiser (2015) suggested a positive correlation between frequency of selfie posting and narcissistic personality traits characterised by grandiosity, egocentrism and a desire for

eneration. In Weiser's research, while age did not moderate the relationship, gendered patterns were evident, with selfie-posting frequency associated with entitlement/exploitativeness dimensions of narcissism among men and leadership dimensions among women. Interestingly, Weiser points out that entitlement/exploitativeness is also associated with more pathological forms of narcissism (see also Sorokowski et al., 2015; McCain & Campbell, 2018).

There are several interlaced conceptual and methodological reasons why we would argue that traditional personality research places limits on what can be understood about women's photo-sharing practices. First, the focus on personality variables is mixed. Some research reports a link between selfie posting and narcissism (e.g. McCain et al., 2016; Weiser, 2015) while others find no links between the two (e.g. Etgar & Amichai-Hamburger, 2017; Banjanin, Banjanin, Dimitrijevic, & Pantic, 2015). As Pearce and Moscardo (2015) argue, it is important to acknowledge that, even when links are found between selfie behaviour and narcissism, they are not always consistent or strong (e.g. Barry et al., 2017; Fox & Rooney, 2015; Chan & Tsang, 2014). The association between this personality trait and selfie posting rests on the notion that there is a consistency between this personality type and behaviour – how people are and what they do. Methodologically, what is prioritised more generally in personality research is the measurement of relevant internal characteristics and propensities of the individual via personality scales. The selfie becomes conceptualised as a visual vehicle of those individual properties. However, analysis of actual content and form of selfies is not central or visible to these methodological processes. Much like the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition example, it is the frequency of selfie taking that is used to gauge the extent of social acceptability violations. In these studies, frequency is evidenced most often through self-reports. The quantity of selfie posting is subsequently explained through attempts to establish a link with individual personality scores. Whilst we would argue that there is a place for quantification in making sense of social phenomena (Capdevila, 2007), in this case, it inevitably means that meanings established in and through the visual are lost.

In some studies, the selfie in the social network becomes implicated in these methodologies as a device to check against individual personality patterns. For example, in McCain et al.'s (2016) study, mentioned above, 199 participants gave researchers access to their social media accounts and data extracted was used to investigate predictions about personality variables (for example, personality measurements were used to predict number of reported followers, likes and frequency of selfie posting). In others, selfies are used as experimental stimuli to gauge audience perceptions, attitudes and judgement of selfies compared to other kinds of photos (e.g. Krämer et al., 2017; Re, Wang, He, & Rule, 2016). The preparation of selfies as stimuli, most often of confederates whose pictures then feature in online profile mock-ups, coupled with a focus on individual internal processes, effectively decontextualises photo sharing from the on/offline social communicative processes in which it is always already embedded. This speaks to Rose's (2012) exploration of the relationship between visual research methods and visual culture, in which she argues that this consists primarily in their shared

understanding of images as tools with which communicative work is done. To decouple these, we would argue, would be misleading.

Following this argument, that women engage more often in SNS and photo sharing becomes unsurprising given that femininity has long been associated with relational communicative work (Capdevila & Lazard, 2015). SNS are spaces that lend themselves to this purpose in the sense that social media is a well-established means through which people form and maintain relationships (Shpigelman & Gill, 2014). What is also important, however, is how this becomes played out in relation to particular implications that photo sharing on social media has for women and girls. For instance, the ways in which selfies increase audience focus on the body is especially noteworthy because of the ways in which feminine identities become defined in relation to how they look. Research suggests that women's bodily appearance is prioritised, at least in contemporary Eurocentric culture, and judged in relation to ideals of attractiveness – slim, young and blemish-free (Jeffreys, 2005; Stuart & Donaghue, 2012). Accordingly, questions of appearance, interwoven as they are with gender and generation, call for visual methods in psychological research on selfies. As we elaborate later in this chapter, in our research, visual methods have made it possible to engage with the complexity of meanings produced in the process of women's photo taking and upload and how these are read and reread in digital spaces.

### **Visual methods and online photo sharing**

Visual methods in the study of selfies and digital photo sharing are certainly not new. However, to date, this has been predominantly in fields such as communication studies rather than psychology. In a broad sense, the utilisation of visual methods in these fields has opened up possibilities to engage with understandings of digital photo sharing that move away from characterisations of uploaded images as static snapshots of narcissism to complex communicative accomplishments. As Hess (2015) has argued, 'the selfie exists at the intersection of multiple assemblages ... that draw complex and often contradictory subjectivities together' (p. 1629). Using images to ground and elaborate his theoretical argument, Hess suggests that the selfie assemblage is constituted through at least four overlapping elements which include the: (1) self; (2) place; (3) device; and (4) network. More specifically, the selfie simultaneously authenticates and speaks to a performative self. Selfies testify to the placement of the self in a captured moment, and do so in a way which is both spontaneously performed yet rehearsed and edited. His argument, which our research supports, is that while selfies are most often staged they are still trying to say something 'real' about the person posting them. They are, in a sense, a laboured reality.

This laboured reality speaks to the relationship of the networked user to time and place as well as how the user becomes configured through the process of taking the photo and corporeally stylised to the device as the body becomes angled to take a 'good' selfie. They complexly locate the user within physical and digital networks – their circulation implies their status as public. Hess notes that, when



they become recirculated outside networked ‘friends’, they slip outside the control of the photographer and become positioned within broader articulations of power and identity. Hess offers the example of selfie ‘fails’, those photos which are revealed to be too fake (e.g. obvious editing) or too authentic (e.g. where something private or personal is left on display), as pointing to tensions around the display of the body. Visual representations of the self can navigate multiple understandings of acceptabilities around bodily display. In the context of the network, recirculated selfie fails ‘highlight the potentially restrictive reframing of bodies as women are called out for attempting to present their bodies in particular ways’ (p. 1635).

Increased visual presence of women’s bodies coupled with cultural imperatives around self-improvement undoubtedly become interwoven in gendered identity building online. Importantly, emphasis on self-improvement is intricately tied to the individualism that predominates and shapes Eurocentric contexts (Stuart & Donaghue, 2012; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). Young women are required to be self-branding and entrepreneurial on a personal level (Rettberg, 2014), and the responsibility for the state of their bodies is placed squarely on them as individual, ‘good’ citizens who should strive towards and achieve better bodies as dictated by current social standards of neoliberalism (Tischner, 2013). These pressures become reflected in the ways in which gender is done online. For example, Doring, Reif and Poeschl (2016) note that selfies posted by Instagram users not only reflect traditional gender stereotypes but are even more stereotypical than those found in magazine advertising.

One upshot of these processes has been the rise of the social media influencer – a phenomenon by which ‘celebrities’ are paid to endorse specific products through photo sharing with their followers across their social media accounts. This produces a particular articulation of posting by visibly embedding economics into the relational practices of social media. By monetising online relationships, these becomes visibilised not so much as a ‘fail’, but more as a perversion, which adds yet another layer of valuation to the practices in a gendered and generational way. As Abidin (2016) argues, ‘female Influencers have been re-narrativising the moral panic surrounding selfies to such a successful extent that good selfies and selfie taking skills are a prized asset in the Influencer industry’ (p. 15). The relationship between this and the curation of self is however far from straightforward in that it (re)produces not only a subject but also a commodified visual object. Tracing this object is thus best done through attention to the visual accomplishment via a multimodal approach which engages visual methodologies.

## **Methodology**

The growing popularity (or at least awareness) of visual methodologies has drawn attention to the material-discursive-affective assemblage (Warfield, 2017) denoted by the object under study – in this case, the photograph. In our research, our engagement has followed at least three distinct, though conceptually linked, approaches to this exploration. The first is the use of the photo-elicitation

interview in its more traditional, essentially discursive, form (Harper, 2002). The second is through the gathering and textual analysis of publicly available images in social media postings. The third is through what we refer to as processual selfie completion. In what follows we will describe how we have made use of each of these approaches in an endeavour to make sense of online photo sharing.

### ***Photo-elicitation interviews***

Photo-elicitation in visual methods has a history of attending to identity (Harper, 2002; Howarth, 2011). Following this tradition, our focus has been on how identity is curated through the practice of image posting. In our research we asked participants to talk about their selfie-posting behaviour, inviting them to bring along their smartphones so they could select and describe how and why they made decisions in relation to their practice. Selfies have been conceptualised as doing different jobs and completing different functions. Existing research, as we have discussed above, has focused, in psychology, on their function as exemplifying particular personality characteristics primarily identified as negative. In our research we encourage participants to tell their own stories, prioritising what they identify as relevant to their own practice and experience, whilst conceptualising the process as a communicative or conversational (Katz & Crocker, 2015) accomplishment.

Photo-elicitation is a discursive methodology as the analytic focus is on the interview which is then transcribed and textually analysed. The photo itself serves to elicit 'affect' and 'memory' in particular ways (Harper, 2002; Reavey, 2011). This function was evident in our research. A fairly unambiguous example comes from a participant as she describes one of her selfies:

So, the first selfie I chose was me on holiday in Mauritius. I chose this one because contrary to popular belief not everyone who takes selfies is a massive narcissist. In this one, I didn't have any makeup on but I felt like really happy and confident being on holiday. Sure, like I'm a bit sort of sunburnt in it and I look a bit baggy around the eyes, but because it was such like a happy photo I didn't think it mattered.

The first point to note is that this short extract picks up immediately on precisely the two functions of photo-elicitation most prominently identified in the literature. With no prompting from the interviewer, the account moves directly into the description of a memory of the event and the feelings experienced in the moment the selfie was taken. What the text also does, already in the second sentence, is to mediate the potential imputation of 'narcissism' that is so closely tied to the practice of posting. The participant states 'contrary to popular belief not everyone ... is a massive narcissist'. This potential critique is further countered through the identifying of the motivation as an affective one (such a happy photo) rather than an aesthetic one. The confession that she was not wearing makeup and was a bit sunburnt underscores the role of the selfie in expressing something real or authentic about herself, as Hess (2015) has argued, thereby also mitigating against widespread

notions of selfies as inauthentic or fake. It would follow then that the authenticity that was captured in the selfie was less the lack of makeup and more the happiness of the photo.

When sharing the photo, the participant describes, later in the interview, how this selfie was posted on Instagram because 'it is a bit more close knit, it is a community as well', evidencing the relational, along with the communicative, aspect of the selfie. In a linked study we conducted using Q methodology, findings indicated that this relational aspect of selfie posting often serves to mediate potential readings of narcissism (Capdevila & Lazard, 2017b). The Instagram community also functioned to underscore her confidence that she would receive the desired number of 'likes'.

Rettberg (2014) has argued that there are three modes of self-representation in social media: visual, textual and quantitative (all with a history that predates social media). By allowing a multi-modal (Reavey, 2011) exploration of the selfie assemblage, the photo-elicitation interview provides a local and contingent analysis that resists the narrowing of a complex and nuanced behaviour to a simplistic, often pathological, understanding.

In the following extract from photo-elicitation research on digital mothering and sharenting (Lazard, 2017), authenticity is similarly prioritised over bodily appearance. In this case, what is being produced is the identity of 'good mother'.

Yeah, she came and got in bed with me that morning and she said to me, what did she say to me now? She said something really funny. Something like, 'Morning, mum. Come on, I want a cup of tea,' or something ... something along them lines. And I said, 'Oh, just give me five minutes. Let me come round'. I can't jump straight out of bed. I'm not a morning person at all, so I said, 'Come and get in bed with me,' and she come and got in bed with me and gave me a big cuddle. And I just thought that's the perfect photo opportunity of me and Grace ... I just love it. We're so ... we're just close ... I haven't got no makeup on. It's got no filters on it. My hair's up on top of my head. I'd just opened my eyes. Yeah, I look beautiful.

So whilst this participant suggests she could be happier with her bodily appearance in this photo, what is prioritised is authenticity – the photo captures something 'real' and 'genuinely' nice about her child and their relationship (Figure 14.1). The prioritisation of the authentic representation of their relationship over her own bodily concerns constitutes her as a good mother. The context of the photo affirms its authenticity because it frames the image as spontaneous. The authenticity of the picture bolsters the importance of capturing mother and daughter togetherness in the photo, which serves to position the participant as a good mother.

Family photos have been understood to inscribe bodily spatial proximities that (re)produce togetherness (Lazard, 2017; Rose, 2016). The forward-facing functions of smartphones emphasise bodily closeness in order to make sure all members are captured in frame – perhaps more so than when a third person takes the photo. As we mention above, smartphone photo technologies require particular orientations of our bodies to take a 'good' selfie (Hess, 2015). The arrangement of physical bodies highlights the ways in which the body configures with mobile devices:



*Figure 14.1* Mother and daughter in bed (image reconstructed to protect the participants' identities).

I'd like to think we were very close, me and Grace, definitely, because Grace will always say things like, 'Take a picture, mum,' or, 'Can we have a selfie'. Yeah, she does. She does. Yeah, I would like to say we were close. We've got a good relationship.

The physical act of taking a selfie becomes understood as a means of doing closeness and togetherness. The request by the daughter for a selfie with her mother constitutes familial intimacy as well as a recognisable, everyday act of doing togetherness because selfie taking is ubiquitous. The photo, therefore, is not merely a representation of mother–child intimacy; this intimacy itself becomes constituted as a practice of familial closeness.

### ***Online data collection #Motherday***

The visibility of mothering on social networks has been particularly interesting to us because it foregrounds mothering identities and experience in a way that was perhaps not possible, at least to the same level of visibility, before the routine use of SNS. While there is a substantial and growing body of research on apps, blogs and

websites around mothering, at the time of writing, literature on the use of Twitter or Instagram that specifically examines expressions of digital mothering or digital families is limited. In order to explore the constructions of mothering on these platforms, in 2018 we collected data on Mother's Day. We chose Mother's Day because it is socially important in the countries which celebrate it – both on- and offline. Facebook reported that 'in 2016, Mother's Day drove more posts in one day than any other topic on Facebook'. Similarly, for Twitter, in 2017 there were 729 million tweets about Mother's Day. Thus, these platforms offer an interesting space in which to explore how mothering discourses and imperatives play out as we celebrate mothers but, more than this, it offers an opportunity to explore how mothers' relationships with family become publicly represented online. Although mothers do post on this day, it is more often the case that they will be posted about by their children, allowing for the exploration of relational issues and concerns around motherhood which become expressed visually and textually online.

We collected data on the 11th of March (Mothering Sunday in the UK) and the 13th of May (the most frequent date that year for Mother's Day in North America and most of Europe). We focused on publicly available accounts on Instagram and Twitter for ethical reasons – on the assumption that those posting on public accounts will be aware that these can be seen by individuals not in their networks. We searched for the tags #motheringsunday, #mothersday, #mothersday2018 and #happymothersday and specifically collected posts which had attracted comments. This produced a total of 60 posts and approximately 11,000 words of text. Given the platforms under consideration, it was not surprising to find that virtually all the posts included images. Our analysis focused on the text and images posted as well as the comments that accompanied them. Our findings indicated that, while posts often refer to traditional mothering values such as selflessness, care and support, the comments that followed focused overwhelmingly on visual compliments.

The compliment of choice in our data was 'beautiful', variations of which were used approximately 154 times. Although other words such as 'lovely' and 'adorable' were also common, the appeal to beauty was far more prevalent across the comments (Figure 14.2). Whilst we acknowledge that this likely responds, in part, to the centrality of the visual in family photos, this adjective was closely interwoven with gender and assertions of familial similarity. This call to beauty has strong resonances with the extract we discussed in the section on photo-elicitation of the mother–daughter selfie in which the participant exclaimed 'Yeah, I look beautiful', thereby underscoring the notion that one would aspire to looking 'beautiful' even when instantiating 'good mothering'.

In our study, young women's uploads tended to draw on specific mothering ideals to celebrate their mothers – the idea that mother's labour is invested in the support and development of their children and that 'good mothers' are selfless.



**HAPPY MOTHERS DAY TO MY BEAUTIFUL, SELFLESS, AMAZING MOTHER!** 🌸🌸🌸

*Thank you for supporting me in chasing my dreams and being my best friend through it all. I love you! ❤️*

**#mothersday2018**

*So beautiful and lovely! Happy Mother's Day to her!* 🌸❤️

*Awesome pic... You two definitely look alike!*

*Beautiful* 😊😊😊😊😊😊

*Dang. That was pretty clear haha. Go [name] & her mom!!!!*

*Beauties.* 🥰👍

*Well I see exactly where you got your beauty from [name]!!* 😊😊

*[name], your mom is a beautiful lady and I hope she had the best Mother's Day ever!!!!*

*You favor her a lot too!*

*One heck of a mother... she obviously raised a beautiful, selfless, amazing daughter too!!!*

*Never quit. #MotivationMonday*

*Happy Mother's Day to your mom [name]* 🌸

*Really beautiful [name]*

*Wow I can see where u get ur Beauty from ur mother did u enjoy the day with her?*

In this post the photo draws attention to the mother's prioritisation of the child. Whilst the mother is central to the photo she is less central than her daughter because she is positioned behind her, thereby foregrounding her daughter. 'Beautiful' is used in the post but it is prioritised specifically in the responses to the post. The biological connection is flagged ('You two definitely look alike') and the physical attractiveness of both mother and daughter is underscored and grounded in the biological connection. 'Beautiful' is a powerful compliment (stronger than 'lovely', for example) but is a particular kind of compliment that favours the visual. Indeed, we would argue that 'beautiful' responds to surface appearance much more so than other possibilities for general compliments (e.g. lovely), which is consonant with the gendering of the term as it is located in well-established social imperatives around the importance of outward appearance for feminine beauty. The responses in the thread work with the word 'beautiful' in terms of its objectifying quality and in doing so resonate much more strongly with the supportive comment practices (e.g. 'like' culture) around posting by young women. Thus, in this example we see how the use of normative constructions of gender persist while being mediated through online familial relationships.

### ***Processual selfie completion***

The third visual method we use in our research is what we refer to as processual selfie completion. This approach brings together the photo-elicitation discussed above whilst drawing on notions from story completion methodology (Braun et al., 2018). Story completion is itself a novel methodology that aims to provide a context in which participants are invited to elaborate and extend on an initial exposition or scene setting

(story stem). In our research the elicitation device becomes the invitation to produce a selfie within a prearranged context. Participants were thus asked to take and process selfies *in situ* to allow for a discussion grounded in their practice, the relationship between app enhancement and their image as well as how this process relates to online postings. In our study participants were free to use the images, social media platforms and apps of their choosing. What is of interest to the researcher is the procedure itself, the order and timing of each step and the discussion from beginning to end, providing in this way a unique insight into the processes as well as the production of visual image construction.

This method is similar to that employed by Warfield (2016) in which the interview serves as a context for selfie taking and posting. By asking participants to talk through the process *in situ*, the method provides a grounding to explicate ‘the relationship between discourse and materiality in our research practices, analysis, and presentation’ (Warfield, 2016, p. 2). Warfield, in her study, asked participants via video conferencing in an adjacent room to the researcher to talk through the process of taking selfies as they took them. Warfield argues that it became apparent that the video conference component was experienced as somewhat manufactured and artificial which constrained the elicitation of the everyday sense making of selfie taking.

In the development of our processual selfie completion, we began by drawing on photo-elicitation practices by asking participants to first discuss selfies previously posted to social media that they had selected to discuss in the interview. This discussion moved on to questions that invited the participant to take selfies with the researchers present. Arguably, much like Warfield’s analysis of the methodological procedure she used, processual selfie completion can be conceptualised as manufactured. However, we would argue that, maintaining a connection between the researcher, participant and selfie taking, the process remains located in the research interview as a specific social encounter. We would concur with Speer’s (2005) contention that ‘all data can be natural or contrived depending on what one wants to do with it’ (p. 196). In our methodological case, the process of showing as well as telling researchers about the experience of taking selfies allowed participants to develop a nuanced account of the minutiae of the practice that would have been lost if photo-elicitation alone had been used. This is illustrated in the following data taken from transcriptions of young women participating in our research. In the extract below, the participant was invited to take a selfie and then talk us through the process from taking to posting (Figure 14.4):

- I: So you said you took the photo in Snapchat and then you’re editing in Instagram. Could you tell me why you did this?
- P: Yeah, Snapchat automatically puts you in mirror view and takes the um picture as it would, like, being in a mirror essentially. So I think I’m sort of used to doing that, people are more used to looking at themselves in a mirror.

What we found of particular interest in this extract is the way in which the phone and platform are used, in the process of photo sharing, to translate the visual self from the participant’s own perspective (‘people are more used to looking at themselves in





Figure 14.4 Image from processual selfie completion data.

a mirror’) to the anticipated audience. As such the intention is not only to shape how they themselves will ultimately look, but importantly, how they will be seen.

Through this methodological approach our participants were also able to demonstrate subtle nuances around the process. Much like a professional photographer, the young women were able, without hesitation, to describe each choice and decision with impressive precision:

I could use the camera app or I’ve actually got a range of other photo apps that add different filters and effects ... then I would hold it up, get the right angle so I’ve got the light going directly onto my face so there aren’t any inconsistencies in my skin or shadows across my face.

The running commentary provided evidenced considerable expertise, both technical and artistic, that could be easily lost when transferring the narrative to a context removed from the practice itself.

Moreover, as Reavey (2011) has argued, space can be ‘an integral influence on the selves that we can be’ (p. 9). For this reason, we have aimed to keep our data collection to unrefined contexts, preferring surroundings familiar to the participants themselves. In this way, the selfie remains conceptualised as a complex communicated assemblage of presentation, identity and embodiment in both on- and off-line space allowing for innovative uses of visual methods.

### **Concluding remarks**

What all of our methods have in common is that they allow for an engagement that does not prioritise an attributional or pathologising approach to understanding online photo sharing. By attending to the process by which identity becomes constructed through the

display of self online, and how this is inextricably intertwined with off-line life, it becomes possible to make sense of these practices in ways that allow us, as we have argued, to attend to the production of what has been referred to as the selfie assemblage. The use of visual methods in this approach is fundamental. Through photo-elicitation, the gathering and textual analysis of postings around a given image and event, and the use of processual selfie completion, we are able to, quite literally, make visible the interplay of photo sharing, (re)presentations of self and image with gender and generation within a broader relational analysis.

The participatory nature of the visual techniques was an additional enticement for us. As Harper (2002) argued some time ago, ‘When two or more people discuss the meaning of photographs they try to figure out something together. This is, I believe, an ideal model for research’ (p. 23). We would agree and posit that this collaborative sense making can be a particularly powerful analytic in the context of social media because it is precisely this communicative and relational function of image posting that has come out most strongly across the empirical studies we have conducted into this phenomenon over the last few years. It is this approach that allows us to take our eye away from the pathologising narratives of dominating mainstream approaches to psychology, not by denying their validity, but rather by contextualising and relativising them within ‘the bigger picture’.

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## PART III

### Shared visions

Opening up researcher–participant  
dialogues in the community and  
beyond



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# 15

## VISUALISING MENTAL HEALTH WITH AN LGBT COMMUNITY GROUP

Method, process, (affect) theory

*Katherine Johnson*

### **Researching LGBT mental health in a community setting**

Studying the mental health of lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or trans (LGBT) people is not a straightforward issue. Over the last 20 years there has been a growing acknowledgement that *some* LGBT people suffer from high levels of mental distress, including anxiety disorders, mood disorders, suicide and self-harming behaviour, substance misuse problems, and this distress is related to elevated levels of discriminatory practices including physical and verbal abuse (King *et al.*, 2003a; Warner *et al.*, 2004; King *et al.*, 2008; Elliott *et al.*, 2015). Yet, because of the socio-medical origins of ‘homosexuality’ and ‘transsexualism’ that led to the pathologising of same-sex and cross-gender activities, and the classification of homosexuality and gender dysphoria as forms of mental illness, there has been longstanding mistrust within LGBT communities of some psychological and psychiatric practices. Despite a shift to more person-centred approaches focused on supporting coming out in a discriminatory world (O’Shaughnessy & Speir, 2018), the legacy of pathology has been difficult to shake off and studies have pointed to homophobia and heterosexism still existing within the mental health services (e.g. McFarlane, 1998; Tate & Longo, 2004). To emphasise, it is only in very recent times that the British Psychological Society has developed a government-supported memorandum of understanding committed to ending the practice of conversion therapy (Moon, 2018), and a recommendation to ban conversion therapy has only been introduced in one Australian state (in Victoria in February 2019). Qualitative accounts of the experiences of LGB people who have accessed mental health services note problematic encounters that range from ‘instances of overt homophobia and discrimination, to a perceived lack of empathy around sexuality



issues by the clinician' (King *et al.*, 2003b: 3), and insensitivity in service delivery (McNair & Bush, 2016). For trans people experiences of therapy can be 'a fearful encounter, often associated with medical intervention' (Applegarth & Nuttall, 2016: 1).

This historical context also shapes approaches to researching LGBT people's experiences of mental distress and the provision of appropriate services to meet their needs. Firstly, spotlighting evidence of elevated rates of psychological distress or suicide-related behaviour in the LGBT population runs the risk of problematically reinforcing the relationship between sexuality/trans status and mental health issues, implying that mental health problems are the result of being LGBT. This is not the case. Rather, research in the area consistently suggests that mental health problems such as depression and anxiety are related to the impact of minority stress and discriminatory practices (Meyer, 2003; Warner *et al.*, 2004). Whether these negative experiences are the origin of an individual's mental distress is less clear, but they would inevitably exacerbate any coexisting mental health issues.

The second consideration for researchers is how to gain access to a research sample willing to take part in psychological research. This is because of the level of suspicion already surrounding the psychological professions coupled with the problem of accessing hard-to-reach and/or hidden minorities. In order to overcome this, my research (e.g. Johnson *et al.*, 2007; Johnson, 2007) has worked within a community psychology approach (e.g. Harper & Schneider, 2003; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010) using participatory-action research methods (e.g. Brydon-Miller, 2004; Johnson & Martínez Guzmán, 2012; Silver, 2016). Community-based participatory research is an internationally recognised framework for developing culturally relevant research and addressing issues of marginalisation, inequality and injustice that involve participants within all aspects of the research process to foster belief in and ownership of the research objectives and outcomes.

In 2005 I began developing a research programme with MindOut, a local community and voluntary sector organisation supporting LGBT people in the UK who identified as having long-term suicidal distress. Our first project produced a qualitative understanding of suicidal distress and strategies for survival (Johnson *et al.*, 2007) via focus groups and one-to-one interviews. There were many positives to come out of this research in terms of the impact of the findings on local policy initiatives and future funding bids of the organisation; however there were some limitations with the participatory element of the research methodology. On reflection, although participants had been involved in designing the research focus and interview questions, there was little in the data collection stage that managed to transgress the traditional dichotomy between the researcher and the researched. In order to address these limitations, in our second project, the group decided to employ a visual methods approach (Reavey & Johnson, 2017), specifically photography, to reflect on everyday experiences of living with and managing their mental health. As Frith, Riley, Archer and Gleeson (2005) suggest, visual research methods can enhance psychological inquiry in three distinct ways: accessing information that is hard to reach through other forms, such as interviews;

changing the ‘voice’ of the research by using participatory-action research principles to enhance the agency of the participant in the research process; and enabling research findings to reach a wider audience by presenting them in both a visual and verbal format.

### **Photography, ‘photo-elicitation’ and the ‘photovoice’ method**

The use of photography in social, cultural and community studies is not new. Collier (1967) is credited with being the first to use photography as part of the research interview (Loeffler, 2004; Castleden *et al.*, 2008) and it has been used in a number of studies to facilitate how participants make sense of their identities and everyday life experiences (e.g. Ibáñez, 2004; Pink, 2013). The photo-elicitation method has grown in favour with discursive researchers who are interested in embodied experience (e.g. Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Radley & Taylor, 2003; Kantrowitz-Gordon & Vandermause, 2016) as the use of visual methodologies can open up participants and researchers to alternative modes of experience, more so than the heavily monomodal approaches that dominate textual qualitative analyses (Reavey & Johnson, 2017). Photovoice has also grown in popularity as a community-based, innovative approach to facilitate the participation and empowerment of those who are marginalised, and as a means to promote social change by engaging marginalised groups in dialogue with those who have the potential to transform opportunities and inequalities, often including policy makers (Wang *et al.*, 1997). These projects have been used with diverse groups such as homeless adults (e.g. Radley *et al.*, 2005), indigenous communities (Castleden *et al.*, 2008) and black gay men and lesbians in post-apartheid South Africa (e.g. Graziano, 2004). Many of these engagements with photographic research methods are community-invested research initiatives in health and education (e.g. Killion, 2001; Latz, 2017; Mitchell *et al.*, 2005) and increasingly mental health (e.g. Fleming *et al.*, 2009; Han & Oliffe, 2016).

In political agendas that aim to tackle social injustice, arts- and culture-based initiatives offer much value in promoting better psychological well-being. Prior to the global financial crisis in 2008, the left-leaning UK government think-tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research, sought to put the arts and culture at the heart of a social change agenda, with then Director, Nick Pearce, stating ‘the arts and culture go to the heart of what it means to be a fulfilled, active citizen. They have the capacity to touch and inspire us as individuals, and to challenge as well as cement our social norms’ (Cowling, 2004: i). In this short collection of essays mental health was highlighted as one of the three targets for the arts, alongside education and offender rehabilitation. Two chapters were dedicated to promoting the importance of art-based initiatives, arguing that art projects have the potential to tackle negative public attitudes towards people with mental health problems (White, 2004) and, if targeted at specific groups of people with mental health problems, that it is ‘intuitively appealing that engaging in artistic activity may prevent mental ill health and, indeed, may promote recovery and prevent relapse in people who have already developed mental disorders’ (Geddes, 2004: 64). It was with these hopes in mind that we entered into the spirit of our second research

project and clarified our aims in relation to understanding LGBT mental health and challenging societal stigma.

### **Aims**

- To use photographs and textual extracts to explore how group members view themselves, their feelings and the world around them, as well as the practices and techniques that help or hinder in the daily management of their emotional well-being.
- To provide an innovative photographic exhibition showcasing the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people living with and managing mental health issues.
- To develop a sense of ownership and achievement over the research process for participants.
- To raise awareness about mental health and challenge stigma by promoting a dialogue between the photographers and audience.
- To invite the audience to comment on the exhibition and become part of the research process.

### **Method and process**

As with our previous project, the initial stages focused on discussion and building a secure relationship with mental health service users. The group facilitator and eleven people from Out of the Blue@MindOut invited me to attend one of their closed meetings to discuss the photographic project, sharing ideas and concerns. We discussed in detail the process by which we would work, including what type of camera we would use (disposable or digital), who and what might be in the images, issues of confidentiality and anonymity and how these might be addressed, a time period for taking the photographs and subsequent interview with myself, and ideas for the final exhibition, including what space we would like to have the exhibition in and who might help fund the expenses. After this initial discussion seven people decided to take part and I drafted a research design taking into account key concerns of the group and wrote a detailed ethics proposal for the University Faculty Research and Ethical Governance Committee. The central tenets of this process are summarised below:

- Participants were to use the camera to take photographs to represent and reflect on their mental health and their experiences in relation to their sexuality and/or transgender identity.
- Participants would use a digital camera rather than a disposable camera because they were concerned about creating unnecessary waste and because some wished to use the timer feature which was not present on disposable models.
- Participants were to take no more than 15 photographs in order to keep some boundaries around the timeframe for the interview, 35–55 minutes.

- Participants would have access to the same model of camera. Two cameras were distributed and each participant had the camera for a week.
- Participants were free to take photographs of themselves and other people. If they wanted to take photographs of other people and discuss them within the project because of the relationship they had with them they were to ask the person to sign a consent form, first to take their photograph, and second, to display the photograph in a public forum. It was agreed that there was no need to request consent from 'background people' who might appear in a more general shot if they were of little relevance to their personal narrative.
- Interview data were to be treated as confidential while photographs would be shared with the group with the potential for further discussion.
- Short extracts from the interviews would accompany the photographs in the exhibition in order to contextualise the image and these were to be agreed by participants.
- The group agreed that they would like their first name to accompany the photographs in the exhibition.
- After the interview each participant chose three favourite photographs and these formed their contribution to the exhibition.
- A comments box was left in the exhibition space for the audience to become part of the project through their own textual reflections.
- The exhibition was called *Focusing the Mind*.

### **The photographic exhibition: representing data**

The exhibition was first displayed in the Gallery Foyer, Grand Parade, University of Brighton (24 July–2 August 2008). The space is located in the university building but accessible to a broad spectrum of the local and wider community as numerous external events are held in the hall it surrounds. Although we have no formal record of the number of viewers, in the time of the exhibition display we can estimate that at least 300 people would have had the opportunity to view it, including passers-by and specific visitors. People who passed by included attendees at external conferences, music events and film events; arts students; attendees at the hip-hop graffiti exhibition that was running in the next-door gallery; and a multitude of university staff attending the retirement party of the Registrar. The display material for the exhibition was professionally produced by a local photographic laboratory and included 21 images printed in matt and mounted on aluminium. The exhibition was hung with the assistance of a gallery technician. The photographs ranged in their representational content, stylistic approaches, conceptual engagements and aesthetic value.

Hanging the exhibition was an early stage in the process of analysing the images as we discussed whether to organise the images 'thematically' or by 'photographer'. Although there were some immediate themes that ran across the chosen images, attempting to present the work in this way produced an uneasy visual experience. It became apparent that the individual style of each participant was expressed across their three photographs, even down to the colours they attended to. For example,

one set of three photographs was bathed in a pink glow that clashed terribly with another set of photographs, and a second set that sought out the fresh green of rolling hills and woody grasslands took a while to place where it complemented rather than overpowered surrounding images. The decision was thus made to organise the exhibition aesthetically, with any attempt to synchronise overall meaning or provide an interpretative framework left to the viewer, with some assistance from the brief qualitative extracts presented alongside each image.

In addition, the exhibition served as a second data collection point. As one of the aims was to promote a dialogue between participants and the potential audience, a feedback box was left in the exhibition with paper and pens so viewers could comment on the exhibition. In total, 39 comments were left in the box and these were added to the data set.

### **Constructing an analytic approach**

Analysing visual data according to the principles of ‘photovoice’ (Wang & Burris, 1997) requires a large group discussion in order to pick the ‘best’ photographs followed by group codification of key issues, themes and theories and for these to be presented to policy makers and others who may be able to facilitate social change. In this tradition it is ‘story telling’ that is emphasised, with the visual playing an important role in accessing particular stories of the marginalised and providing a means by which to communicate concerns in a way that might be more readily noticed than through written reports. Key features can therefore be discerned as classification of community concerns, dialogue, connection and social change.

Like others (e.g. Castleden *et al.*, 2008), this project followed a modified approach to ‘photovoice’ as our data consisted of seven detailed individual interviews that discussed all the photographs and not just those participants picked as ‘best’ for the photo-exhibition. In addition, our data set includes 39 responses left in the comments box. Our goal was also to promote dialogue, connection and social change, but the central element of producing a photographic exhibition prior to explicitly coding the data into themes and categories blurred the analytic process. While participants picked out three photographs and began to recognise similarities across their experiences, the analytic process was primarily left to myself, with participants’ goal to represent their feelings in a public domain that viewers from all backgrounds might connect with. In addition, the exhibition enabled us to promote the status of the visual above a thematic and conceptual understanding of the content of participants’ images or narratives, which has further implications for the types of interpretations we can make from the data. We were left with a large data set that incorporates both visual and textual material and raised certain challenges in terms of making sense of the data as a whole, while attending to the specificity of individual experience, and attending to the broader social justice goals expressed in the original aims of the project. For the purpose of this chapter, I will discuss three broad themes that encompass the exhibition photos, before moving on to reflect on the audience engagement with these, and how we might make sense

of their comments in relation to the initial aims of challenging stigma and transforming social attitudes towards LGBT mental health.

### **Embodied representations of affective states**

A key theme across the data was attempts by the participants to represent and discuss affective states. Images depicted and texts supported feelings of ‘anxiety’, ‘distress’, ‘frustration’, ‘grief’ and ‘fragility’. These were not simply communicated in a descriptive form, but the image/text format enabled the viewer to experience how these are lived through the body. For example, the image ‘Uphill battle’ presents a steep, grassy slope covered in dandelions that rises up to a bright blue sky. On its own it could be interpreted as ‘spring-like’ and ‘uplifting’ but the text draws us through the metaphor of life as a struggle, as a battle and as a hill that has to be climbed. This embodied sense of weariness is found in other images that communicated a longing for alternative embodied states such as the desire for ‘peace’ that is found in ‘I wish I could be like that’ (Figure 15.1). Here the participant has taken a photograph of a giant sculpture of a sleeping man, resting barefoot on lush, green grass in a woodland glen. The text that accompanies this image states:



*Figure 15.1* ‘I wish I could be like that’.

I've been really agitated and not sleeping and constantly feeling so over-emotional and overwhelmed, I just wanted to ... he looked so peaceful, and that's what I wanted.

To understand what is presented I propose that, while extracts provide us with meaning via textual description, the images draw us into the lived experience, firstly through our own affective response to what is shown, which is then enhanced or challenged when we read the small extracts printed by their side. For example, the spatial landscapes and scenes of nature depicted in 'Horses', 'Bleak' and 'Trucking on' communicate something beyond the textual descriptions that accompanied them. As we will see when examining audience feedback comments, rather than simply offering a conscious rational understanding of what is represented the viewer is either 'touched' or 'moved' as some of the images trigger uncanny feelings of recognition and familiarity, or they are 'repelled' by them.

### **Weight gain and medication**

A second key theme that came out in most participants' images and narratives related to the side-effects of medication and in particular weight gain. In 'Side-effects' the participant illustrates the complexity of managing her mental health regimen with bottles and boxes of tablets arranged around her medication box that lists days of the week and times of day, including morning, noon, evening and bed. The boxes are displayed for us on a wooden table. They are not pristine, rather battered, bent and crumpled at the edges, illustrating a familiarity that comes with the routine of everyday use, like a well-read book. The extract supports this but also reveals something else:

I've been on some of those medications for years. In fact, all of those medications for years. And I've had seriously bad side-effects from them. I've ended up in hospital more than once from low sodium levels ... so that signifies for me the fact that my psychiatrist was, in my opinion, poisoning me ... I want to complain about it ... he kept prescribing the same tablets with the same side-effects.

In the extract we sense more acutely the participant's sense of frustrated hopelessness, underpinned by a quiet anger at the risk she has been put through and with her complaints not heard. One question for this project is whether the use of the camera enables her to 'voice' her complaints and whether the appropriate audience will hear them. For me, as one possible reader, I return to the deferment in her verbal contextualisation where she states 'in my opinion' followed by the accusation of poisoning. To me it stands as a deferral to the better knowledge of the 'experts', the psychiatrists who have kept her on certain medication despite the side-effects, and it is only via the image/text interface that she is able to represent her long and frustrating encounter with medication, where the battered pile of boxes can be interpreted as a seemingly necessary but maligned element of managing mental health.





healthy' (fruit) despite 'cravings' (Peperami) alongside concerns about weight gain. The image also illustrates the regulation of medication through the box that is opened to reveal the day, while the laying out of an entire day's food and pre-rolled cigarettes demonstrates significant effort to create an image that conveys the impact of regulated consumption on their life. Textually, the account that accompanies the image in the exhibition is brief and indicates humour, but the image conveys the more daunting challenge of managing the identity shifts that have resulted from rapid weight gain: 'My medication has made me put on weight and I'm just constantly thinking about food and wanting to eat ... But, I also have a Peperami addiction (laughs)'.

The images discussed here demonstrate the dramatic effect medication can have on an embodied sense of self, yet the way these concerns are communicated through everyday images of food enables multiple readings from viewers in terms of their own concerns with diet, body weight and the contemporary cultures of food and consumption.

### **Support and emotional connections**

A third theme that can be read across the images relates to the formal and informal support networks participants draw on for their mental health. Across all the images people took photographs of a family member (Dad), pets (cats, dog, horses) and organisations (GP surgery, online support network). In the exhibition this theme was developed through a photograph of ornaments given to one participant by a friend, called 'Treasured possessions', and physical activity as shown in 'Climbing', demonstrating the trend to acknowledge the benefits of physical activity in relation to mental health and substance misuse. In terms of a more detailed analysis for this theme I focus on the photograph 'Alcohol' (Figure 15.3). This is a striking image. The vibrant primary blue colour instantly stands out amongst images that are darker in context and colour. The picture illustrates the Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) sign stuck on the inside of a glass door with a large blob of Blu-Tack. The clarity of the image means you can almost trace the imprinted finger ridges of the person who adhered the sign to the window. Focusing on the round, blue symbol we see in the reflection the participant. She is holding the camera across her face in order to take the picture, which surreptitiously maintains her anonymity. She is therefore both visible and invisible, as we cannot identify her. There was no planning in the process of taking this picture, unlike the detailed preparation that went into 'Everything I consume in a day'. Instead, this picture is an instinctive snapshot, a literal interpretation of the request to show things that help manage her mental health. Yet, the contingent coalescence of sunlight and the glass door makes for us, the viewer, a terribly clever picture. Here she stands, an anonymous outsider at the heart of the image. The light and colour reflect her and the possibility of recovery as she stands with the world passing by behind her, the glass door allowing her to see into another world, on the steps of an AA recovery process. As the participant states in the text that accompanies the image:



*Figure 15.3* 'Alcohol'.

That is the sign of Alcoholics Anonymous. I've recently become a member and it means a lot to me because I've gained friends and they are very, very helpful. I've got an alcohol problem and they're being ever so helpful at trying to get me off the alcohol ... it's become part of my life.

### **Audience engagement with the exhibition**

While some have written elegantly of the relationship between politics and the aesthetic in visual forms of social activism (see Radley (2009) for an excellent account), few authors comment on the process of wider audience engagement. An innovative factor of this exhibition was endeavouring to incorporate the audience within the research process by asking them to leave their comments and reflections. This was not an objective or systematic evaluation, as only 39 comments were left from a much larger audience, but it did allow us to say something about the process of communication between the exhibitors and the audience.

As one might expect, in the 39 comments left in the box we found a variety of responses to the project, with most being loosely classified as supportive engagement. In terms of facilitating connection, many members of the audience left comments that suggested we had been successful in communicating with them

through an affective dimension. For example, some left broad comments about how the exhibition as a whole had made them feel:

I felt very emotional looking at these photos and reading. I was laughing and crying at the same time. It touches me to think we are not alone. Thanks for a great exhibition!

Wow. What an amazing moving exhibition. So personal and universal. Moved to tears – strange as the space is full of graduation people buzzing around but that’s great coz at least some are looking at the pictures and not immediately turning away. Uncomfortable viewing for some who want to pretend we are all OK. I love this – it’s beautiful – thanks. Well done.

Indeed, it seemed that the audience were able to connect because of the way the images, aided by the text, *moved* them. It was their own embodied experience and relation to depicted affective states that facilitated a dialogue that we had hoped might be part of the process of challenging stigma about LGBT mental health. What was interesting here, though, was the way that sexuality and gender identity faded into the background, both in participants’ images and the responses of the audience, despite it being publicised as an LGBT project.

Looking over the entire content of the participants’ images, only one person provided any symbolic form of representation of queer life in their images. This was not a purposeful image taken to demonstrate identification with the LGBT community, but rather a chance symbolic representation revealed by a background item in a photograph. The symbol was indicated by a business card depicting the rainbow flag that happened to be left lying on a desk that was photographed to represent using the computer to communicate with other mental health service users (a representation of support gained from an online bipolar user forum). This suggests, much as Bourdieu (1990: 7) claims, that when photographing the everyday, identity is not ‘proclaimed’ as an explicit intention, but rather deciphered through surplus meaning that ‘betrays’ our belonging to particular social groups (in this case the business card). In the exhibition itself there were no visual representations that would ‘betray’ the group’s belonging to the LGBT community. Other than the signage that advertised the image as an ‘LGBT mental health project’, the only other specific mention of sexuality was found in the comments box. One comment was left from a viewer who also experienced mental health problems and it proposed that mental health stigma is more prevalent than that of sexuality. This is presented in full below:

There’s a stigma about mental health, it’s more of an ‘issue’ for other people than sexuality. You have to be brave to express how you feel to other people, but I think being open is the best thing – seeing how other people feel the same as me makes me feel so much better. This is an excellent exhibition. I really empathise with everyone involved and wish them all the best.

### *Visualising mental health in an LGBT group*

This is interesting, but it appears that in the context of this exhibition the importance of a non-normative gender or sexual 'identity' faded to the background in favour of affective connection.

Other members of the audience left comments that related to specific images, rather than the exhibition as a whole, highlighting the specificity of individual experience and how we might be moved by different images and stories, rather than all moved in the same way. Again, here the connections transgressed sexual orientation and gender identity, with the audience leaving comments about how images reminded them of friends, parents and family members. For example:

I found the exhibition extremely moving and sad. P's photo of 'coping mechanisms' reminded me of my dad who died a year ago and who was an alcoholic. Even the medication is the same. I feel angry at how he was treated by the mental health services in Brighton. I think this project is invaluable in highlighting mental health problems and the effect they have on people. This project humanizes the issues of poor mental health. I think that those who took part are very brave and only wish my dad had been able to have such support that the group offers.

The final sentence here does something to acknowledge the role of this LGBT support group and the general lack of support for people with mental health problems in the community at large. Finally, it should be clarified that not all comments left were supportive, and not all viewers were moved in an empathetic or sympathetic manner. Two of the shortest examples include:

BOO-FUCKING-HOO

**W T F??? How enlightening?!!<sup>1</sup>**

Trying to reflect on what these might indicate is purely speculative. We do not know whether they are responses to the images, whether they were written after lengthy consideration of the exhibition as a whole, or whether they were left to be purposefully polemical. What they do indicate, though, are the less sympathetic cultural responses to psychological distress, which in itself reminds us of the stigma that still surrounds mental distress. These comments were received in good humour by the mental health group; in fact they made most of us laugh. There was something shocking in their short, sharp dismissal, relief that they were not homophobic assaults, and their very existence confirmed the purpose of the exhibition. These comments showed that we had created a dialogue with a range of viewers and that the need to challenge and respond to various cultural stereotypes about mental health is ongoing.

**Witnessing, wit(h)nessing and social activism: some theoretical reflections on the transformative possibilities of participatory visual methodologies**

Participatory research, although commendable for the value it promotes in working with marginalised groups, is often criticised for producing a-theoretical understandings (Silver, 2016). Many papers, including some of my own endeavours (e.g. Johnson, 2007), focus on the 'process' element of the methodology, the experience of working with groups, with less space dedicated to producing empirical findings, reflecting on the types of transformations that take place, and even less on the theoretical implications of such engagements. In this final section I want to embed some of the insights discussed so far about the relationship between the photographers and audience within a deeper theoretical framework that considers the concepts of witnessing and wit(h)nessing in the aesthetic field and the possibility for personal and social transformation.

In his work on images of illness, Alan Radley (2009: 81) discusses the position of 'the aesthetic of witness' that arises when an artist forms a relationship with individuals who are willing to engage with their work. For Radley, this relationship is experienced in the affective realm and 'lies in a confirmation by the reader or viewer of a semblance of illness that the work is able to show forth'. Thus, the recognition that the viewer brings to the work 'resides in ideas-with-feeling evoked in the reader or viewer, for whom the work illuminates something previously in shadow, or names something that was previously inchoate'. I would like to argue that it is this type of process that the viewers of this exhibition struggled to describe in their accounts of 'feeling moved' or 'touched' by their viewing experience.

Bracha Ettinger's (2006) theory of the 'matrixial borderspace' offers us a similar insight into the affective realm of feelings of togetherness and 'wit(h)nessing' that can be prompted, for her, through the aesthetic field of painting. Her theory is a complex, dense, looping development of Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalysis, which does not seek to replace the notion of the phallic order, but rather indicates that there is an alternative form of connection that we all emerge from. For her, we are born into trauma and loss, a loss of connection to the (m)other, and we are driven towards linking with the Other. This desire has been repressed, but through art we are opened to a partial memory: a partial memory that we are always already in togetherness, always already in relation to the other; a partial memory that can move us to tears without our knowing why we are moved.

Within her account, there is little consideration of other forms of artwork than painting, and perhaps like others considering the relation between psychology and art (e.g. Arnheim, 1986), she would be sceptical of photography as an artform. That said, many of her observations in relation to terms such as com-passion, wit(h)nessing and metamorphous (via Freud's account of the Uncanny) resonate with my observations of the processes at play in this visual participatory project. There are many provocative extracts from her writing that would make for suitable

reflection, but this I hope captures some of the transformative, intersubjective, affective adventures in relationality that can emerge when engaging with a participatory visual research project.

In [the] artwork, traces of a buried-alive trauma of the world are reborn from amnesia into co-emerging memory. The potential for partially sharing this memory in the transferential borderspace offered by the artwork is the condition for its apparition. Such uncanny anxieties allow and accompany the contact with the gaze with-in/through a work of art. ... The matrixial gaze thrills us while fragmenting, multiplying, scattering, and assembling together the fragments. It turns us into what we may call participatory witnesses to traumatic events, at the price of diffracting us. It threatens us with disintegration while linking us and allowing our participation in a drama wider than that of our individual selves.

*(Ettinger, 2006: 152–153)*

## **Conclusion**

Visual participatory projects are predicated on the assumption that they will facilitate social and personal change by demonstrating community needs and focusing on broader processes of 'empowerment'. However, when embarking on a visual participatory project it is useful to be aware of certain limitations to their transformative possibilities. First, no one who took part in the project had some miraculous recovery in terms of his/her/their own mental health, although some reported a sense of personal achievement from taking part. Second, not all the participants found taking part a rewarding experience. The original premise was that having a camera increased people's control over what they revealed, and some reported an almost therapeutic benefit in terms of using the camera to freeze their negative and spiralling thoughts. Others, however, reflected on the difficulties of focusing on their mental health and sense of identity, and some only produced a very small number of photographs and stated that they would not want to take part in another similar project. Thus, we must be cautious in celebrating visual methodologies on the basis of increasing participation or user involvement for marginalised groups.

Finally, participatory visual approaches cannot be seen as some rationalist project that will enable the transformation from situation A to situation B: we did not know beforehand how we or the audience would be affected by partaking in or viewing the project (we did not know even if we would be able to put an exhibition together). What our photographic exhibition revealed, then, is that we can be transformed (even momentarily) by our viewing, that connections do sometimes occur, but that we cannot predict what form this may take: there is always a 'risk' in the types of affective responses that may be experienced by both those participating in the project and those who view; we do not know exactly how, when or if we will be affected. When coupling this with the multi-modal form of representation available to visual methods; the possibility for numerous interpretations, readings, affective responses and connections is significantly amplified.

## Acknowledgements

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## Note

1 WTF??? Colloquial text speak for What the fuck???

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# 16

## IMAGERY AND ASSOCIATION IN A GROUP-BASED METHOD

### The visual matrix

*Lynn Froggett*

#### **Introduction**

The visual matrix is a qualitative, group-based method that was originally designed for researching experience of artistic production or reception and the psychosocial impact of aesthetic objects, processes or events on audiences, groups or communities.<sup>1</sup> Its applications have since broadened insofar as it offers an empirical method with which to research the psychosocial and symbolic aspects of cultural imaginaries. Following Charles Taylor (2004), a cultural imaginary can be thought of as the expression or representation, in the form of images or stories, of a common background understanding that makes possible communication and social practices – it thus underlies how a group forms its ideas about interaction with other people, the natural and man-made world and the moral order.

A psychosocial account of a cultural imaginary includes a consideration of the identifications and projections through which members of a group or community reproduce and relate to the world in which they imagine themselves to live. An unarticulated and partly unconscious cultural imaginary finds localised expression in a visual matrix and acquires symbolic form through the image presentations and figurative language of the participants. The symbolisation is ‘presentational’ rather than discursive (Langer 1948 [1942]) – its function is to find imagistic forms for the affect that circulates in the group.

The visual matrix involves a carefully designed facilitation process which is set in motion by a visual or sensory stimulus that bears on the research problem. The aim is to discover what the stimulus *produces* in the participants and the use they make of presented imagery, rather than *what they think about it*.

In this chapter I describe the visual matrix method, briefly highlighting its applications and some of the theoretical resources that have informed its

development.<sup>2</sup> However my focus will be on the conduct of the visual matrix and the nature of symbolisation within it, illustrated with an extended example of its use in an arts and community setting. The interpretive protocol that follows a visual matrix session will be explained before concluding with an observation on the relationship between imagery and the language in which it is expressed. The case example has been chosen to highlight the fact that in this method the group is the primary unit of analysis, and the focus of interest is on shared rather than individual experience. The reader is also advised to view a short demonstration matrix in relation to a photography exhibition on YouTube.<sup>3</sup> This conveys the nature of the ‘snowflake’ seating arrangement and the thinking that takes place within it.

### Overview of visual matrix process

A visual matrix can accommodate between six and 30 members who are invited to gather in a room that offers the possibility of creating a setting free from external interruption and where time boundaries can be maintained. The chairs are arranged into a snowflake pattern – a seating configuration that encourages people to speak into a shared space, rather than making eye contact and addressing one another directly (Figure 16.1). This helps to avoid the pairings, positionings and power plays that are typical of group dynamics (Bion 1961).

An entire visual matrix session has three parts. Firstly, a stimulus is presented. This is primarily visual (such as photographs, artworks, exhibitions or performance), or it could be designed to promote visualisation through figurative language such as poetry. This is followed immediately by the visual matrix itself, which lasts from 45 minutes to an hour. The role of the facilitators is to model the associative process through occasional participation, but not to lead or shape the content of the matrix once the initial stimulus has been delivered. Providing assured facilitation protects the matrix from internal distractions and external impingements, a ‘reverie’ can emerge. This is a state of mind described by Wilfred Bion as daydream-like, indicative in a visual matrix of a well-functioning container (explained below), in

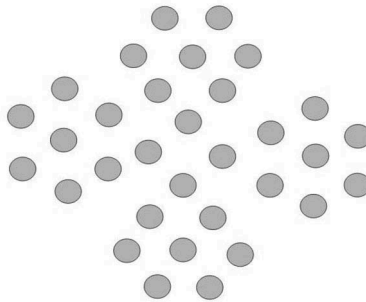


Figure 16.1 Snowflake seating configuration.

which unbidden, unforced and often surprisingly creative associations of ideas spontaneously occur (Bion 1970).

Once seated in the snowflake, participants are invited by the facilitator to present images, thoughts and feelings that the stimulus has aroused in them. These are prompted by affective and sensory experiences within the group, but typically include biographical and cultural material that is brought to mind and expressed in a flow of associations. Images offered to the matrix can come from a wide range of sources: visual memories, dreams, landscapes, films or other cultural material. At times the associations will form into clusters of imagery from which other thoughts branch out. Frequently other sensory registers are introduced: acoustic, haptic, olfactory, kinaesthetic. Ideas or strands of thought can appear with specific affective intensities, after which they may be overlaid by other images and ideas and lie 'dormant', re-emerging later in the matrix. Alternatively, they intertwine or diverge, building rhizomatically into a form of collage.<sup>4</sup> Seldom do they lead to linear themes and the facilitation process actively discourages participants from rationalisation or analysis. If thematic discussion or long narratives occur one of the facilitators will offer an image to pull the matrix back into associative mode. Experience felt and enacted 'in the moment' is prioritised and, because this is prompted by other participants' associations, it has a shared character.

Key to a well-functioning visual matrix is the 'containment' offered by the setting. The idea of a container-contained situation is central to Wilfred Bion's theory of thinking (Bion 1959, 1962, 1970) as a process of affectively and sensuously grounded symbolisation. 'Containment' depicts the conditions under which sense impressions are received by a receptive consciousness (the container) able to process them into thought. Bion, for whom the prototype of the container-contained relationship is the mother-infant nursing couple, describes the process in terms of metaphors of mental metabolism and digestion. A key function of the container is to allay anxiety, so enabling sensory experience, which is always freighted with affect, to become thinkable and communicable. A similar process is at work in a visual matrix, which aims to provide the containing conditions under which a group can metabolise experience, transforming it first into imagery of its own and thence into a form of verbal language.

The associative process of the matrix has a meditative aspect and often resembles the non-linear thinking of daydreaming – similar to 'reverie' (Bion ([1962] 1970)), where what comes to mind produces affectively laden ideas in imagistic form. If the process is working well (which is to say associations are flowing spontaneously between participants and linking easily to one another (Bion 1959)), the group maintains a calm receptiveness to emergent imagery that is relatively uninhibited by discursive convention. The participants should feel 'held' by the matrix so that any awkwardness or anxiety on their part is moderated, enabling them to process the thoughts that arise. The non-intrusive facilitation which is allowing thoughts to emerge rather than setting an agenda helps to avoid projections by the group on to a leader, or on to one another. The process should be led by the images that the participants offer, without undue dominance of powerful voices. The facilitation and setting are above all designed to maintain the matrix in associative mode. If it veers into analysis or argument the facilitator will gently draw it back by offering another image.

After a short break the matrix is followed by a post-matrix discussion and the chairs are re-arranged into a semi-circle around a flip chart or white board. The group itself maps the material produced by the matrix in order to identify not only clusters of imagery but also their affective and aesthetic character and intensity, linkages between clusters and their significance within the matrix as a whole. The post-matrix discussion effectively enables the participants to establish the frame for an interpretive analysis which is subsequently carried out by the researchers. The research team work as a panel on the audio-recording and transcript of the proceedings, according to a specially developed protocol. This will be discussed in more detail after an example has been presented.

### **Applications of the visual matrix**

The method has been useful in researching aesthetic and affective experience of cultural objects, events or processes which people might otherwise struggle to talk about in words, whether because of personal reticence or social taboo, or because the accompanying emotions are conflicted, or because no clear discourse in which to express the experience has formed. The use of the visual matrix in investigating what emerges in the encounter between public and contemporary visual or performative artworks is a case in point since people often find it difficult to convey after the event a lived aesthetic experience which depends on sensory and emotional engagement ‘in the moment’ (Froggett et al. 2015).

Applications of the method have extended to include highly sensitive topics such as breast cancer (Haga Gripsrud et al. 2018), erectile dysfunction and impotence (Froggett et al. 2017), death and dying (Ramvi et al. 2018) and substance misuse (Manley et al. 2015). It has been used to understand the experience of people living with dementia (Clarke 2017; Bennett et al. 2019) and their carers and advocates (Liveng et al. 2017) where the verbal skills required to pursue a line of discursive reasoning may have diminished, but the visual imagination remains active. In addition, it has offered a means to understand public responses to a variety of mental health issues that arouse anxiety, including obsessional compulsive disorder, suicide, chronic pain and being a patient.<sup>5</sup> The visual matrix has opened up a complex view of responses to psychosocial challenges which are often thought of in stereotypical terms, such as the move from working life into retirement (Liveng et al. 2017). Finally it has been used in art-science contexts where it is difficult to characterise the knowledge that emerges at the interface of disciplines (Muller et al. 2015, 2020) and in progress at the time of writing to research the anxieties posed by the prospect of techno-centred, ‘post-human’ futures (Froggett et al., 2019).

### **The idle women visual matrix**

‘Idle women on the water’ was an art project that took place over several months in 2016 on a stretch of the Lancashire and Liverpool canal in Northern England (Figure 16.2).<sup>6</sup> It created a floating art centre in a butty<sup>7</sup> pulled by a narrow boat which hosted a series of residencies by women artists and writers and a programme



*Figure 16.2* Post-industrial heritage on the Leeds and Liverpool canal.

of participatory activities. The project was run in partnership with Humraaz, a South Asian women's refuge and a local women's centre and residents from a nearby housing estate. They created a temporary community which came together to eat, talk and make art over the summer months. The canal surroundings offer an uncultivated environment of animals and plant life but are dominated by a semi-derelict architecture of disused textile mills. Some of the women had found this combination of nature and post-industrial heritage strange, and at first threatening, but came to appreciate it as a repository of local history and regional identity as time went on.

The research task was to understand how the experience had affected the women involved as a group, specifically to:

- identify the memories that remained with them from the summer and the emotional and imaginative legacy of the project;
- understand how it had affected their relationships with one another and the man-made and natural environment.

We also wanted to understand better how an art programme of this nature could provide the context for a conversational encounter between South Asian and local

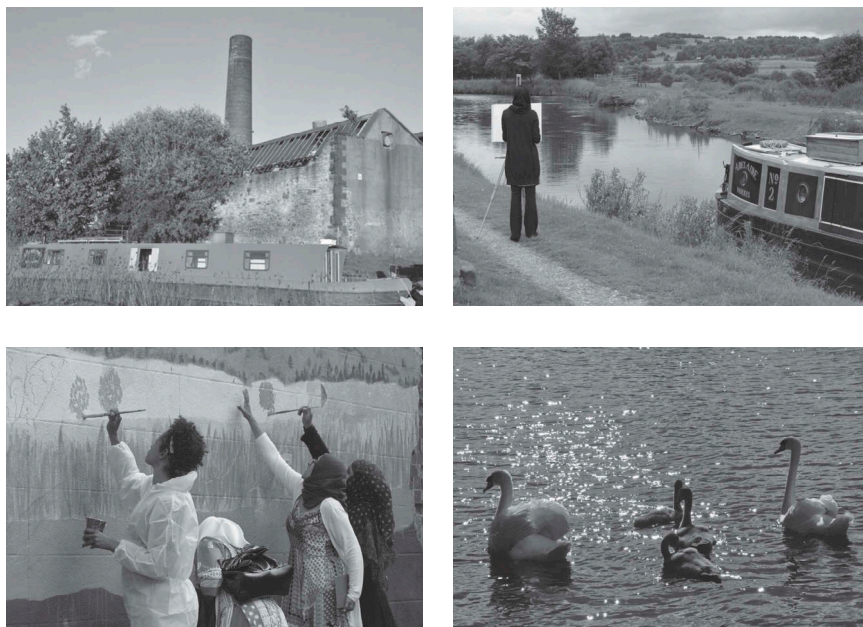
white women with very different experiences of migration and settlement that often manifest in the region as the faultlines of cultural estrangement and racial tension. However, we took care not to allude to this context in order to see whether it would be raised spontaneously by the women themselves.

I have selected this particular matrix because it shows how the participants' thoughts and feelings about their situations were framed by a cultural imaginary that the group inflected with their own experience. Their visual matrix revealed that the architecture and surrounding landscape were dense with cultural and historical significance, acting as a visual metaphor and emotional backdrop for the biographical experiences the women had brought to the group. Discovering and articulating to one another how they held this in common across cultural differences became a basis for solidarity. For both white British and South Asian heritage women a sense of personal and familial loss had been imaginatively grafted on to the landscape, typical in many ways of swathes of impoverished, post-industrial Northern England. The derelict, abandoned mills provided a troubling visual metaphor for their own experiences, while shared pleasure in creative activities stimulated an intercultural conversation and eventually a sense of mutual understanding. This example also shows how a visual matrix can reveal a group's thinking and also offer a space in which to do emotional work. As the group elaborated an imagery of nature re-claiming the decaying buildings, it converged on a sense of the fragility and brokenness of living things, of care and re-birth.

### **Context and stimulus**

This was a small visual matrix, convened in a local community venue in the gloom of a late November afternoon, two months after the art project had ended and the boat had moved on. There were two South Asian women who were vocal representatives of a larger number from the refuge who had been regular attenders of the project over the summer. In addition five white women came from the local estate close to where the boat had been moored, including one who worked at the women's centre. Two teenage girls who had also been regular visitors to the project (a daughter of one of the residents from the estate and a friend) were invited to join. I facilitated with the help of a research assistant. The artistic producers and organisers of the project stayed away in order to give the participants as much freedom as possible to say what was on their minds.

The stimulus in this case consisted of a series of slides designed to trigger visual memories of the boat, its surroundings and the social and artistic life of the project (Figure 16.3). The aim was to orient the participants to the topic without suggesting any particular angle on it. The slides consisted mainly of snapshots taken by women themselves, or by Rachel Anderson and Cis O'Boyle (the producers). We took care to avoid idealisation of the surroundings through professional photography, and the pictures were shown in no particular order – a mixture of flora, fauna, buildings, passers-by, participants, artwork and the canal environment.



*Figure 16.3* Selection of stimulus images.

I assured the group that after viewing the slides in silence they would be free to contribute or not, according to inclination and without turn taking. As is usual in a visual matrix I asked them to present what images and associated ideas came to mind as and when the moment seemed right. They were informed that the process would run for 45 minutes and that there would then be a short break before we discussed what had emerged, after which there would be an opportunity for comments or further questions. I asked who wanted to present the first image, and during the matrix intervened only twice – each time to offer an image when the group appeared to be drifting into a dialogue between two of its most talkative members. Even then I took care not to present new material, staying close to the imagery that participants had already been developing.

As long as the facilitators ‘host’ rather than lead the process, participants offer spontaneous associations according to their own criteria of significance. In this case there were two researchers but only one (myself) actually facilitated, while the other helped to welcome people, took manual notes, assisted with the seating and audio-recording and, most importantly, listened and observed, attending to the affect that accompanied the emergent collage of associations.



### **Pace and affective climate of the matrix**

Identifying the affective character of a visual matrix is part of an interpretive process which follows and which will be outlined later. Here, I describe it as it appeared to us at the time. These impressions were conveyed by the pace and wording of the associations, the imagery that the group selected to work with and our perceptions of the affect in the room. They were later qualified by a close self-reflexive reading of the transcript. In the extracts that follow individual speakers are not identified because the accumulation or collaging of imagery means that it is in a sense co-produced and expresses shared ideas of the group.

From the outset this matrix appeared unusually slow and intimate. It became clear that these women were acutely conscious of loss – personal, familial, cultural and historical. The emotional tone was ‘elegiac’ from beginning to end. Elegy acknowledges things past, and arises from an affectionate relationship to those things, a desire to bear witness to them and a sadness at their passing. However, the matrix started with the ‘other-worldly’ nature of the canal setting:

Well I remember when C. got in the dinghy and when she got out I felt like I was out of this world cause I’ve never been anywhere closer to water

This other world (Figure 16.4) suggested a lost world of the textile industry and its passing, family members who had worked in the mills, the industrial heritage of Lancashire, and the singularity and beauty of its landscapes.

Each presented image was followed by a meditative silence until the next one was offered. Such long silences (between five and ten seconds) sometimes feel awkward, but the women appeared to be enjoying the opportunity to re-visit their memories. The following interwoven ideas have been extracted from the matrix transcript for presentation purposes and brevity, but they have been selected because they were highlighted by the participants themselves in the post-matrix discussion.



Figure 16.4 ‘Closer to water’.

### **Inter-twinning of personal and regional histories of loss**

The matrix had to accommodate the feelings aroused by the fact that the project had been and gone. It began by assigning itself a task of double mourning triggered firstly by the emptiness that remained to be filled now that the boat had moved on; secondly, by the decline of the region that had touched all their families' lives. Very early on its personal resonance was introduced:

The picture of the older ladies in the looms. My family for generations and generations have all been in the textile industry so it made me feel proud, really, to be from Lancashire.

This pride, now compromised by the empty mills, was grafted imaginatively on to the broad historical canvas of Lancashire's industry – a loss of heritage intensely and personally felt:

I think the emptiness is something. I think it struck me as being an empty place now and I think something like you said ... there's an emptiness there for you now, which is quite, you know, it's quite sad.

The deserted mills may be loved and laden with history, but are at risk if a use cannot be found for them (Figure 16.5). The predicament of the Mill Towns resonated with the participants' own, and especially so for the women from the refuge whose experiences of family rupture had left them at times adrift and depleted:

I mean I love the buildings but there's a bit of sadness there. They're derelict. They are a kind of a shadow of their former selves. They get



*Figure 16.5* 'There's an emptiness there'.

knocked down for new estates because it's a small country and there's not enough houses and you know it's sad really – to me it is anyway – losing that history, local history, of what we were. Great mill towns that were, you know, and that's just gone and the history is going with the buildings. It's cheaper to knock down than to...

### **Cross-generational experience**

There is another idea that works its way through this matrix, a counter-point to the sense of loss, in cross-generational histories that live on:

They've got models actually inside Oswaldtwistle mills where you can actually walk round and look at them. Somewhere in there there is a photograph of my Dad and my Grandma.

Traces of earlier generations highlight the different patterns of migration and settlement that these women and their families have experienced. The potential for new connections across the cultural differences in the group is a source of both surprise and hope. However there is an awkwardness around racialised difference – the group departs from working with imagery and moves into argumentation; speech patterns become halting and sentences trail off while the associative process breaks down, as is typical of a visual matrix when it begins to get mired in difficulty:

It's nice sometimes just to have women and not have any other things that we could just kind of ... women who would have never met ... you know what I mean, and actually finding common ground. When you were saying Asian people and white people – unfortunately there is a segregation – you know what I mean? You would be lying if you said there wasn't but I think, you know, it's ... I think it's important all getting together actually learning about what especially in this climate where Islam, you know Muslims, and they have negative connotations towards it ... and it isn't nice.

The group is beginning at this point to search for a commonality in women's experience, some of it grounded in anxiety and fear – hinted at here, but not yet explicitly explored.

### **Ambivalence and personal confidence**

The visual matrix constantly navigated the temptations of romanticisation and regret with what might be described as reflective ambivalence. Emptiness needs first to be faced; only then can it be experienced as a clean slate to be re-written:

I thought those images with the panoramic view ... although it was a lovely image it was quite empty. There were no barges there, no people, no swans, no horses like the slate had been cleaned.

### *Imagery and association in a group method*

This prompted the women to consider how the project had helped them to widen their horizons. It created a place:

where anybody would come – a very easy going person to a very highly intellectual person could go. And we had a luxury of meeting people from all over – some people came from London.

There was something about this mix of different and cosmopolitan backgrounds (Figure 16.6) that brought to mind the welcome the group extended and the ‘smiles on women’s faces’ which helped them to own an internalised negativity. The second personal pronoun appears – both a generic and a particular ‘you’ directed at one another. Here again, imagery dissipates in the face of a loss of confidence that is keenly felt:

you’ve got something else to give. You know what I mean? Draw on those things, because, you know, I think it’s a lot about negativity, cause if you tell yourself that you can’t do this, you can’t do that ... but actually just give it a go and try and see, and actually get something from that; and it’s like that confidence to actually think you’re good enough to aspire to something else, I suppose.

At a late stage in the matrix two trains of thought are brought together through a single nodal image of Lancashire’s formerly confident industry and the labour and gender solidarity it had generated.

I think the picture of all the women facing forwards with their arms around each other I think it made me think of it was a project which brought together people who would otherwise never have met and barriers were broken down, common ground was found and I think it brought out sisterhood again, of women.



Figure 16.6 ‘Meeting people from all over’.

## Connection with nature

An aspect of the women's newfound confidence was the discovery that they could be at home in another element through connection with nature (the matrix circles back to the 'other-wordliness' of its beginning, elaborating it with new content). For local women who had grown up in the vicinity of the canal and whose children had used it as a playground, there was less caution. For others who had spent much of their lives in domestic settings which themselves were unsafe, connecting with nature and animal life was a pleasurable discovery, although not without its own risks. Imagery surrounded the culturally ambiguous figure of the dog as aggressor – receptacle for projected human aggression – and then as victim:

And you know that the person that was with the dog – he didn't even stop the dog attacking. The mum and dad did. Very forcefully he got that swan free from the dog but then the dog ran and the man didn't even stop.

He would just shout for the dog 'come back' or something. It shows that everybody needs to take responsibility to preserve the nature.

... You know there were so many other people coming with dogs but never ever anyone attacked. We were all sitting there and people were passing. It shows that this ... is not in the animal – it's the person's responsibility, and understanding

From this point on, an identification with the fragility of living things develops as the matrix brings to mind 'broken legs' – first of a cygnet, then a horse and then of the playwright, Mojisola Adebayo – who since her residency with idle women had also been grounded by a severe fracture. This succession of damaged creatures, animal and human, speaks to a sense of brokenness that is very present in the group, yet another implicit link with the 'brokenness' of Lancashire's industrial past. However, nature provides an image of protection. A scene witnessed on the far side of the canal is described (Figure 16.7):

the horses had babies there and we understood a little bit more about their way of life and how you know they ... and one day we came a baby was born. And the foal was on the ground so all of them [mares] crowded around that little foal. Wildlife that needs protection. It was really a pleasure to be able to see something from such close quarters. Well, I've never seen anything like that before. I've seen horses on the TV and as a child in Pakistan, but not babies fresh and newborn and protected.

## Personal and collective creativity

It is directly after this imagery of birth, cooperation and mutual protection that the participants begin to talk about the creativity they have discovered in themselves through the things they have made, poems they have written and food they have



*Figure 16.7* ‘Horses had babies there’.

shared. Emblematic of shared creativity is their mural close to where the boat had been moored. This enduring visible legacy of their presence has so far withstood destruction (Figure 16.8).

The before and after pictures of the wall where the mural was. I’m not a negative person but I’ve thought from time to time I wonder if it’s been painted over, sort of vandalised.

No it hasn’t. It’s not vandalised.

No? Brilliant.

- Nobody’s wrote on it. It’s still there cause I just live around the corner from it, I just live up the road, so I don’t have so far to go. I’ve been walking past it and sometimes you still get people stopping and looking at it. So I just walked past and still look at it.
- And apparently, if you catch the train, you can see it from the train as well. And I just found out that there’s houses being built over the wall so we’re hoping it just stays.
- It was like we left something there that’s still alive in that surrounding and passers-by – they were stopping and they were saying ‘oh, what a wonderful transformation’



Figure 16.8 'Something there that's still alive'.

idle women had offered the group an opportunity to use the canal and its surrounding scenery as an ambivalent symbol of hope and connectivity on the one hand, and of isolation and dereliction on the other. Although there was some nostalgia for the summer the matrix largely avoided romanticisation. Because a visual matrix is a form of re-enactment, its affect and imagery are usually isomorphic with the original experience to which it refers – here for example its exceptionally slow pace reflected the slow movement of the other-worldly waters, and of life on the canal. The matrix provides a setting in which that experience can be re-explored 'in the moment'. In this case, having staged in the protected space of the matrix the hitherto unstated awkwardness of cultural difference, they conclude:

I think people said how can you get Asian women and white women together. There was loads of Asian women other than us two. We all got on very well. We never had an issue because we were women – we had our own issues (laughs).

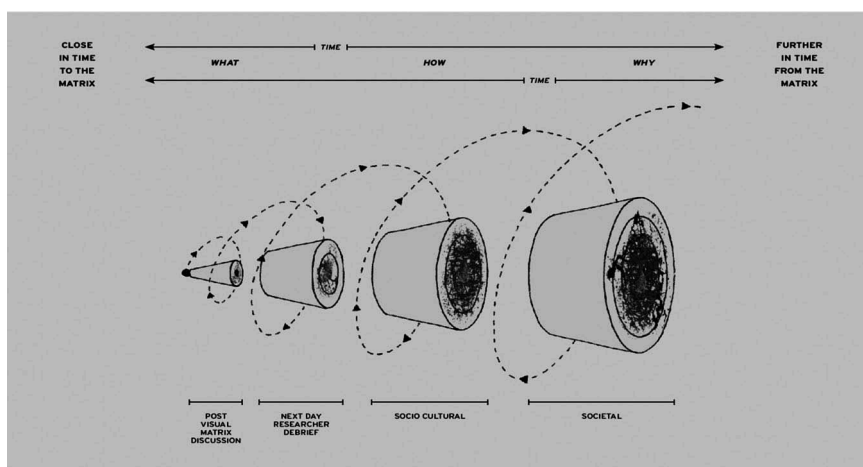
The research team found that, despite the deceptively easy sociability idle women created, the depth of engagement was profound, weaving together personal biographical narratives with a sense of women's contribution to the industry and history of the region. They did this through an intercultural exchange which brought together local white working-class women from an area where there has been a history of inter-racial tension and South Asian women with backgrounds of domestic violence and abuse and little previous access to the public realm. In the course of the project they discovered new shared pleasures in the here-and-now of the canal environment, natural and man-made. Participants were aware of their cultural differences and worked their way through them to reach for newly discovered commonalities.

### **Visual matrix interpretation**

The interpretation of a visual matrix involves several ‘passes’ at the data and in practice there is some overlap between successive phases. The research team works as an interpretive panel combining a reflexive researcher reading of the material from the viewpoint of individual panel members with a hermeneutic process whereby particular interpretations must find support in the whole data-set to ‘survive’ (Figure 16.9). Panel members who have participated in the visual matrix can bring to the interpretation group an ‘insider’ perspective insofar as they have a strong sense of what it felt like to be there and of the relative intensities with which images are presented, but they also move gradually towards ‘outsider’ perspectives as they attempt to grasp meaning and contextual significance. As Gleeson (2011) points out, it is only possible to interpret from a historical and cultural location and the panel must gain access through their interpretation to a cultural imaginary that is in some degree shared.<sup>8</sup>

There is a progressive change of focus as the work of interpretation proceeds from close up to more distant in time from the matrix. Panel members negotiate and contest each other’s interpretations, until they arrive at a consensual view, returning to the data for closer reading where there is dissonance. Broadly speaking, the quality of thinking of the interpretation panel progresses from experiential to analytical.

It is important to bear in mind the nature of the visual matrix collage. This is not a series of disconnected images, nor a thematic or narrative development, but rather an accumulation of ‘scenes’ which take their meaning and significance from their relation to each other and the subjective situation of the participants and cultural context in which they are introduced. Hence the derelict mills are not singular images, rather they evoke the landscape in which they are situated, the



*Figure 16.9* Hermeneutic vortex of the interpretation process.



labour relations through which they were produced, personal family histories, austere industrial architecture, along with an emotional legacy of pride and loss. Some of this is explicitly acknowledged but the air of sadness and regret finds its fullest expression in the slow musicality of the vocal delivery and the persistently sombre aesthetic of the imagery in the first half of the matrix. There appears to be an unconscious and shared 'working through' of loss and a realisation of what might divide the women before they can arrive at a more hopeful state of mind. The sense of emotional resolution comes about gradually through the articulation of emergent and interlinked scenic material, visualised and then expressed in language. It takes a whole rhizomatically structured matrix, dense with affect and embodied ideas, to produce it.

Figure 16.9 depicts the process whereby the scenic content of the matrixial rhizome is analysed. The protocol draws on and adapts for visual interpretation the depth hermeneutic tradition of the Dubrovnik Interpretation Group Method,<sup>9</sup> which in turn owes much to the legacy of psychoanalyst and cultural analyst Alfred Lorenzer (Salling Olesen 2012, Salling Olesen and Weber 2012; Redman et al. 2010; also see Froggett et al. 2015 specifically for development in relation to the visual matrix).

Lorenzer's work (1986; Leithäuser 2012) is still little known to anglophone audiences but is influential in Germany and Scandinavia and has given rise to a 'depth hermeneutic' group interpretation practice which in contemporary research practice has been mainly developed in relation to interview transcripts. Lorenzer's own interest was in the analysis of literary texts and hence in forms of verbal expression that are replete with figurative associations. Of particular value in this context is his fundamental tenet that the 'scene' is the primary unit of experience rather than its singular components and that as an interactive matrix of actions, objects, figures and relations and emotions the scene is dense with sensory and affective qualities and always implicates the witness/participant as subject (in this example firstly the matrix participants who produce the scenes, and secondly, the research analysts who interpret them). This subject is always in interaction with the scene that is the object of attention, and unavoidably brings their own conscious and unconscious biographies and dispositions to the task. Any scenic analysis must therefore be thoroughly embodied and self-reflexive.

A visual matrix produces a succession of scenes to work with as participants weave together situated memories, small stories, scenarios taken from life, dream, art, media or other cultural reference points. Some of the relations that compose these scenes (interaction forms in Lorenzer's terminology) will initially be unsymbolised and collectively unconscious<sup>10</sup> – they may be beset by anxiety, hard to articulate and outside of awareness. A visual matrix is a process whereby a symbolic form is found for such material – through the production and verbal communication of imagery. The various steps in the Dubrovnik Interpretation Group protocol which I describe below are designed to open up the latent, unarticulated content of the matrix.

### **Interpretation protocol**

The black dot at the conical end of the hermeneutic vortex depicted in Figure 16.9 represents the original matrix and is shown running all the way through successive phases of the interpretation. The branching patterns in the cross-sections depict its rhizomatic character. The widening cone represents distance in time from the original matrix and also a broadening of the frame of reference of the interpretation as it changes mode. The matrix transcript is subjected to a threefold line of questioning: substantive or propositional (what was presented?); performative (how was it presented?) and explanatory (why was it presented as it was?). However, as soon as possible after the matrix and post-matrix discussion have taken place, the panel begins, ideally the next day with an experience-near, self-reflexive ‘thick’ descriptive de-brief – with the aim of registering the experiential immediacy of the matrix and identifying and preserving a sense of its affective ‘climate’ throughout the analysis. It is important that the panel does not reach for explanation too soon, as the quality of the original matrix experience as a whole is then lost.

The post-matrix discussion was earlier described as the third part of the visual matrix process but it is *also* effectively the beginning of the analysis because it captures participants’ sorting and prioritisation of the matrix content by mapping images and ideas. It is important that participants lead, with one of the facilitators acting as scribe. I shall now describe the modes of interpretation, bearing in mind that these are always to some extent intertwined.

### ***Experience-near recall***

The panel begins with a ‘experience-near’ description (Geertz 1974), preferably the day after the visual matrix session. The quality of affect and imagery is kept alive in the researchers’ minds by devices such as reading aloud (the matrix is once again ‘performed’) and uninterrupted recall. Besides ensuring that researchers remain close to the experience of the matrix, this is a preliminary safeguard against over-interpretation because it renders transparent each individual researcher’s perceptions and their disposition to construe in particular ways. Panel members have the opportunity to question and challenge each other’s initial viewpoints. Spontaneous close-to-experience researcher recall is often written (as it is below) in the form of a brief summary – a scenic composition (Froggett et al. 2014). As the imagery of the matrix configures into scenes, one of the tasks of the interpretation is to understand the relations that compose them and link them. The compositions are optional but very useful devices for (re-)visiting the scenic quality of the matrix as it occurs in the minds of the researchers who were present.

This short extract was taken from the beginning of my scenic composition, written the following day (Figure 16.10).

The Novemberish gloom in the hall only accentuated the sadness that pervaded the room, yet by mutual consent we left the lights off, so that by the end of the session we were sitting in a semi-darkness that suited the



Figure 16.10 Black water.

palette and bleak aesthetic of the looming buildings – blackening stone beside black water. I wondered at their starting with this when there were so many snapshots of chatting, knitting and making things in the sunshine with the fecundity of living breeding creatures all around.

The silences seemed to be meditative, inwardly directed, yet at the same time shared. There was a feeling of unsentimental togetherness, and when J (who did sound terribly flat and depressed) voiced her sense of isolation, the matrix avoided the blind alley of consolation, preferring tacitly to ‘hold’ her for the time being. She was not forgotten – there was a little homily to come about believing in yourself but only after they had stayed awhile with the depression – allowed it to be ...

Writing this posed a number of questions for me. I had to ask myself, for example, whether, as someone who is much affected by seasonal low light, I was over-influenced by the gloomy room, transposing my mood on to the aesthetic of the matrix; whether or not I was discomforted as an outsider to this group; whether I was too inclined to bring a therapeutic frame to bear on the group’s reaction to J’s apparent depression.

Consistent with hermeneutic principles these possible perceptual biases needed to be identified and then interrogated with reference to the matrix transcript as a whole, where necessary returning to the audio-recording to check the affect that accompanied particular utterances.

***First-pass interpretation (mainly substantive): what was presented?***

The imagery and motifs identified by the post-matrix discussion have to be compared with the matrix transcript as a whole, to establish their 'weight' and significance in the transcript for the group. These take priority for the interpretation panel, who then work towards their own understanding of it. In the idle women matrix the group did not itself consciously identify the 'binding' of biographical material to the built and man-made environment yet there were multiple references to it and we concluded that, beyond providing a material and aesthetic backdrop, the post-industrial landscape infused the mood of the matrix. An awareness of place, familial histories and personal loss and connected with a fear that what they had created together would not survive the attrition of the environment. Support for these interpretations had to be drawn from the matrix as a whole, including the pervasive darkness – the point at which it shifted (birth of the foal), the affect associated with that shift (hope occasioned by care and new life) and any resolution of opposing affects (fear of vandalism/enduring sense of presence).

***Second-pass analysis (mainly performative): how was it presented (or avoided)?***

Thinking about affect takes the panel into the territory of the performative: how material is presented with greater or lesser emphasis, or how it is linked to other associations to re-enact the shifting affective tenor of the matrix. The expressive language is also part of the performance, as is the capacity of the matrix participants to continue working with imagery, to maintain the reverie or to abandon it when they are uncomfortable. Each utterance is understood as a speech act that influences the content and tone of subsequent associations. For example, we had to ask ourselves whether reference to J's isolation was made as matter of fact, expression of sadness, bid for sympathy or implication that the group had not been as inclusive as they imagined themselves to be. What had elicited this expression? Once made, what was its impact? When the matrix withheld immediate consolation, was this in fact the 'holding' presumed in my experiential recall, or were participants confounded at the disruption of togetherness that they wanted to create? Could it have been a form of rejection, embarrassment or heedlessness?

***Third-pass analysis (mainly explanatory): why was it presented thus?***

With increasing distance in time from the matrix, the panel refers to context and develops explanatory hypotheses that can be tested for plausibility in relation to the transcript and by reference to other related studies and literature. At this point people who have not been present in the matrix may be invited to join and offer critical commentary with regard to a particular area of expertise or understanding of context.

In this case, the visual matrix strongly supported the possibility of building a temporary intercultural community around a women's art programme, so we compared our findings with other intercultural projects from the Super Slow Way programme and elsewhere. The research provided evidence of impact which has informed idle women's subsequent work and helped them to explain to commissioners the role of shared aesthetic experience as a basis for community. It underlined the value of mobilising a cultural imaginary through which people understand what makes them different from one another and what they hold in common.

We also concluded that the particular sensitivity towards and use of landscape that developed in the course of the project was related to the fact that it was an *art* project that facilitated aesthetic and affective sensitisation to the environment. It was not so much that the women referred to their creative outputs (though they did to an extent), rather that the art had enabled them to attune to the visual and sensory qualities of the setting: buildings, canal, fields, animals which they used to symbolise their feelings about their own lives. In terms of Langer's theory of presentational symbolisation (1948 [1942]) they found in the aesthetic of the environment forms for feeling. The value of the visual matrix for them was that these forms could find expression through the imagery and figurative language that are promoted by associative visualisation.

### **Working with imagery through language**

One of the challenges of researching lived experience is that many of the methods researchers have at their disposal rely on participants' ability to express the experience in words after the event. The problem is not only that accounts are filtered through a productive and shifting memory, but also that experience in the moment is a composite of sensory registers (Reavey 2011) and finding adequate words to express this multi-modal and interwoven complex of sensations and relations, together with associated ideas and affects, is beyond most people's everyday linguistic capacity. If anything, this is the work of poets and artists who capture the quality of experience as it is enacted or imagined through presentational symbolisation.

Among other methodological and conceptual resources, Lorenzer's (1986) insistence that experience comes 'whole' as scenes (a matrix of relations and interactions) in which the individual subject of experience always plays a part has been important. The scene only becomes intelligible within a frame that gives it meaning – effectively a socio-cultural imaginary. Scenic experience inserts human subjects sensuously and affectively into space and time, which are themselves cultural constructs. Communicating it demands an expressive symbolic repertoire that draws upon the background knowledge of a shared culture to achieve scenic understanding. The aesthetic dimension is inescapable if this is to be conveyed with vitality, which is to say that language must be experience-near. In particular it must avoid cliché (in Lorenzer's terms, a form of language destruction in which the living link to experience is lost). Typically the presentational in language breaks down in favour of the discursive when unconscious anxiety emerges in the group. Disruptions to

associative flow, loss of imagistic thinking, changes in speech style, reversion to cliché all present provocations in which the interpretive panel finds clues to unconscious emotions and ideas or hitherto unexpressed meaning. The hermeneutic process, in other words, works both with what the group struggles to express verbally as it emerges in the matrix and the imagery it uses to bring experience into thought.

### **Last word: limitations and ethical considerations**

It should be clear enough from this account that the visual matrix is a group-based method and not a viable choice if the research interest is in individual perspectives or characteristics. It follows that the selection of participants presupposes enough commonality to be able to form a group. The group sensitivity of the method means that the more participants are able to converge on a primary task, the freer the associations. Shared characteristics may be demographic or reflect interests, or social position. Often very mixed groups – for example, drawn from audiences – have enough commonality in a shared focus of attention; however in such cases the visual matrix cannot deliver clear results with regard to group segmentation. As far as quality of participation is concerned there are always factors that cannot be known in advance which are a risk for any group process – such as where incipient antipathies or collusions might lie. Although the snowflake formation and facilitation are designed to mitigate group dynamics, it is not always possible to eliminate them entirely. It can be very tempting in the analysis to single out particular influences despite the fact that the research task is always to identify the group's shared production. The facilitation, while subdued in style, demands practice and skill and so does the interpretation process.

Finally, a particular ethical anxiety arises by virtue of the fact that thinking in the matrix is emergent and little controlled or directed by the facilitation. The strangeness and unpredictability of the associative process mean that raw nerves can be touched and participants caught off-guard. They are assured in advance that they should only contribute as and when they feel comfortable doing so, and de-briefing is available as required, but the most important safeguard is one that has been briefly touched on here, and illustrated through the case example – in Wilfred Bion's (1970) terms the containment and metabolising function of the matrix itself as it digests its own material.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## Notes

- 1 The use of a matrix, rather than a thematic group discussion (as in a focus group), takes practical inspiration from the practice of ‘Social Dreaming’ developed by Gordon Lawrence (2005).
- 2 The theoretical underpinnings of the visual matrix draw on Wilfred Bion’s theory of thinking (1959, 1962, 1970) and Alfred Lorenzer’s account of scenic experience (1986) – both of which are highlighted in this article. For a fuller discussion see Froggett et al. (2015), in which other sources are also discussed, such as the Deleuzian metaphor of the rhizome, which has been descriptively important in depicting the structure, motion and affect of the matrix (Deleuze & Guattari 1988), and Donald Winnicott’s notion of potential space (1971).
- 3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttHHty0f7Pg>
- 4 Associations spark off each other, giving rise to new sequences and clusters of imagery, and ‘nodes’ of ideas or affective intensities. The Deleuzian metaphor of the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari 1988) captures the formation of images, affects and ideas and non-linear thought processes of the visual matrix.
- 5 Besides its primary use as a research method the visual matrix is also used as a public engagement tool. Workshops with these topics occurred in the context of The Big Anxiety festival of mental health in Sydney, Australia, in 2017.
- 6 <https://www.idlewomen.org/idle-women-on-the-water.html>. idle women was part of the Super Slow Way Creative People and Places Programme, directed by Laurie Peake. The project was produced by Rachel Anderson and Cis O’Boyle. The action research, of which the project is a part, was undertaken by the Psychosocial Research Unit at the University of Central Lancashire and funded by the Arts Council England.
- 7 Butty: a canal boat without an engine that is towed by a narrow boat.
- 8 Where the primary research team is composed of cultural ‘outsiders’ there is scope to involve ‘insiders’ in any phase of the analysis but in particular in the final phase where further contextual knowledge or expertise can be introduced.
- 9 The International Research Group for Psychosocietal Analysis meets annually in Dubrovnik, Croatia, to work on interpretation methods, putting different psychosocietal frameworks into dialogue with one another. See Froggett and Hollway (2010) and Hollway and Froggett (2012) for an encounter between Lorenzerian and British object relations perspectives.
- 10 Lorenzer refers to a societal collective unconscious – material which is disavowed, unacknowledged and absent from the discursive symbolic order, which he explicitly distinguishes from the Jungian collective unconscious.

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# WORKING WITH GROUP-LEVEL DATA IN PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH

## A modified visual matrix method\*

*Darren Langdridge, Jacqui Gabb and Jamie Lawson*

### Introduction

A number of qualitative methods arguably have become over-reliant on the semi-structured interview as a mode of data collection (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). This is particularly acute with interpretive/hermeneutic versions of the phenomenological method, where the semi-structured interview is almost hegemonic. To a great extent this is understandable – and indeed, sensible – given the focus in phenomenological methodology on first-person experience (Smith, 2004). However, whilst we can argue that the socio-cultural and affective will emerge through analysis of an individual’s lifeworld, there remains a general failure within the phenomenological tradition to engage with material, particularly difficult-to-reach affective content, beyond the individual. By contrast, people working with psychosocial methodology informed by psychoanalysis have made great strides in the development of methods designed to work with group-level affective material. A notable example of this is the visual matrix method that we take here as a model for how we might develop a phenomenological methodology to work with group-level affective material.

The visual matrix method is a recent and highly innovative approach to data collection and analysis that has been designed as a means of ‘researching shared experience, stimulated by sensory material’ (Froggett, Manley & Roy, 2015: 1; see also Froggett et al.,

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2014). It was initially developed as a means of evaluating the experience, rather than economic or environmental impact, of public art (Froggett et al., 2014). It was derived from the approach to social dreaming advanced by Lawrence (2003, 2005) and is theoretically situated within the object-relations psychoanalytic tradition, designed to facilitate access to otherwise hidden material (in the terms of Bollas, 1987, the ‘unthought known’ dimensions of experience). As such, the visual matrix method relies on a process whereby a group of participants are encouraged to free associate to sensory material such that imagery, visualisation and affect are given priority over cognition or discourse.

In this article, we take our lead from one of the early existential therapists, Medard Boss (1957), who, having originally trained in psychoanalysis, sought to re-imagine the practice of psychoanalysis through phenomenology. His work resulted in a new mode of clinical practice that honours the practicalities of psychoanalytic practice but theorises the material emerging between client and therapist in a fundamentally different manner, with a focus on manifest rather than latent meaning (see Langdridge, 2013). Our aim in this article is to follow this same path in order to re-imagine the visual matrix method through phenomenology rather than object-relations and Deleuzian theory in the service of developing a method for collecting group-level data in phenomenology. The foundations of the visual matrix method in social dreaming (Lawrence, 2003, 2005), which is discussed further below, connect well with this aim. That is, the model of social dreaming proposed by Lawrence, with his move away from a Freudian analysis of individual psychic content, has much in common with the move of Boss and his development of existential dream analysis. In addition, some of the theoretical resources drawn on by Froggett et al. (2015) – notably the work of Lorenzer (Lorenzer & Orban, 1978) and his use of hermeneutics – nicely dovetail with the aim of this article to take inspiration from this method to produce a method for the analysis of group-level affective material within the phenomenological tradition.

It is important to note that we do not wish to set this article up in an oppositional stance to the original psychoanalytic formulation of the visual matrix method, not at all. Froggett and colleagues’ empirical work has generated valuable insights into a number of topics (see, for instance, Manley, Roy, & Froggett, 2015) and if the researcher is comfortable with psychoanalytically informed methods then they should follow the original method without modification. However, our aim is to take inspiration from this method to devise an alternative means for the collection and analysis of group-level affective material within the phenomenological tradition. The aim herein is to build on the methodological foundations advanced by Froggett and colleagues at the University of Central Lancashire to produce a new method for research within the phenomenological tradition. Following Boss and his rethinking of psychoanalytic practice, we seek to retain many of the practical aspects of the visual matrix method as a way to collect affect-rich group-level data but then rethink the meaning of the material generated through existential phenomenology.

We first discuss the challenge of a group-level analysis for phenomenology, which has traditionally been concerned with individual first-person experience. We then provide more practical detail on the visual matrix method before we introduce the project we conducted. This project involved us working with an artist to produce a film series based on a research project on enduring relationships. The film series was created to explore the power of art (in the form of film) as

a means of engaging the public with research findings. A modified visual matrix was conducted as part of the evaluation strategy for the project. We then move on to discuss the foundations of the visual matrix method in social dreaming and how the matrix method can be rethought through phenomenological theory, particularly through work concerned with existential dream analysis. This rethinking of the foundations of the visual matrix provides the theoretical justification for developing a modified existential phenomenological version. Finally, we present our own analysis of the data produced in the evaluation of the film series, as an exemplar of how to conduct an existential group-level phenomenological analysis of visual matrix data. In the process of presenting these findings we discuss the value and challenge of adopting a phenomenological perspective with the visual matrix method as a means for collecting group-level and affect-saturated data.

### **The challenge of group-level analysis in phenomenology**

Phenomenology is rightly most commonly identified with the work of Husserl. Indeed, it would be bizarre for someone to position their work as phenomenological without due regard to the foundational principles of the tradition laid out by Husserl (1954/1970). However, phenomenology does not begin and end with the work of Husserl (see Spiegelberg, 1994), in spite of continuing boundary wars to this effect. Not only has phenomenological philosophy been subject to continuous debate and development since Husserl but a number of other early figures in phenomenological philosophy – Edith Stein and Max Scheler, in particular – also offer radical alternative insights for the tradition. Much more recently, a notable contemporary development and application of phenomenological philosophy has been concerned with social cognition and questions of sociality (Szanto & Moran, 2016). That is, whilst phenomenology has always been concerned with first- and second-person (singular) experience, contemporary philosophical scholarship has been exploring the problems and possibilities of first- and second-person plural (group-level) experience.

Both Edith Stein and Max Scheler have been rather neglected within the English-language tradition of phenomenology but their work, particularly when developed through contemporary phenomenological scholarship (e.g. Szanto, 2015), provides the philosophical foundation for a group-level approach to data collection and analysis in phenomenological research methodology.<sup>1</sup> The present work may therefore be categorised as ‘phenomenological’ or ‘informed by phenomenology’, depending on the reader’s adherence to Husserlian first philosophy and desire to enforce strict (and historically static) definitional limits around this philosophical and methodological tradition. It is not the purpose of this chapter to engage in such disputes or even discuss the philosophical underpinnings of group-level phenomenology in any detail (for that see Langdridge, forthcoming). The focus of this article is to present an empirically grounded phenomenological development of a group-level methodology focused primarily on experience rather than interactional dynamics. Even so, it is still valuable to briefly outline some

fundamental ideas from Stein and Scheler about phenomenology and sociality to provide some background theoretical context for what follows.

Stein (1917/1989; 1922/1970) provides particular insight into the relationship between an individual and other person or group through her phenomenological investigations into empathy and emotional sharing (Szanto, 2015). She describes in detail the ‘communal life-feeling’ (*gemeinschaftliches Lebensgefühl*) and role of moods (*Stimmungen*) in their intentional constitution. In spite of this shared emotion Stein argues that, even when there is complete immersion in a group ‘we’ (plural subject) experience, the individual remains intact. There is no fusion or extinction of individual subjectivity. Nevertheless, Stein distinguishes individual and communal emotions in part on the basis that they have different ‘subjects of experiencing’ (*Subjekt des Erlebens*). Groups consist not only of a plurality of individual subjects but also – according to Stein – a ‘we’ subject of the shared emotion. This is not some notion of collective consciousness or singular shared super-ego but rather a plural subject or ‘constituted unity’ that may be experienced by the individual subjects who partake in the shared experience, the ‘communal experiential stream of experiences’.

Scheler (1913/2009; see also Szanto, 2016) is even more radical and takes the phenomenological position a step further with his notion of ‘group personhood’ (*Gesamtperson*). Scheler argues that personhood is inherently (and irreducibly) social, with the ‘I’ an essential part of the ‘we’ and vice versa. In keeping with some existential thinkers (e.g. Buber), Scheler also claims that the ‘we’ predates the ‘I’. Building on this position, he further argues that all individuals not only experience themselves as individuals but also as a member of a ‘communal person’ (*Gesamtperson*) and ultimately as a set of ‘group persons’. The term ‘communal person’ is used by Scheler because of his view that groups (especially communities) have values and it is only persons who bear values. Group persons as a concept therefore is not only epistemological or ontological but also ethical (cf. Levinas, 1969, 1981, 1985). Persons, whether individual or communal, are ontologically ‘centres of experiencing’ (*Aktzentrum des Erlebens*), and the integration of mental and practical acts. In keeping with Stein, ‘communal persons’ are not a fusion of persons or in any real way something to be contrasted with individual persons. In Szanto’s (2016: 299) terms they are instead: ‘complex matrices of different levels and depths of the social integration of intentional and phenomenal experiences, volitions, and actions’. They are constituted through ‘mutual co-experiencing’ (*Miteinandererleben*) with an intentional ‘consciousness-of’ that is distinct from and independent of the ‘consciousness-of’ of individuals.

In this context, the very nature of experience must be rethought in a group-level analysis as the traditional phenomenological focus on individual accounts of lived experience become subsumed within a broader sense of collective mood or group personhood. This is not to say that we lose a focus on experience, not at all. But rather individual accounts of experience may be less identifiable as ‘individual lived experience descriptions’ (Van Manen, 2014), as a result of the detachment of the individual from the experience being recounted and distinct affective nature of communal experiencing. The focus in this instance is not the individual and their

concrete lived experience but rather group-level phenomena, especially the affective (the mood), expressed through individuals but referencing a sense of collective or group personhood experience. In these terms, it is the group that ‘speaks’ or – more accurately – is the object of analysis, albeit always as expressed through a plurality of individual consciousness (cf. Schutz, 1932/1967). And it is the modified version of the visual matrix method described herein that we contend provides a means with which to gain some sense of the ‘communal experiential stream of experiences’, or the essence of group personhood itself as it relates to the intended object of the collective group experience.

### **The visual matrix method**

In practical terms, the visual matrix is conducted with groups of anything from six to 35 participants, with one facilitator per 15 members of the group. Participants may be selected on any criteria appropriate to the study but usually on the basis of their shared experience of a sensory experience. The method requires that participants and the facilitator sit on chairs in a ‘snowflake pattern’ such that they can avoid direct eye contact and speak into a shared space rather than to one another. The facilitator invites participants to express their experience in terms of ‘images, associations, thoughts and feelings’, without people taking turns to speak or engaging in other traditionally polite conversational practice. The group facilitator would emphasise that no judgement will be made about any contributions. The facilitator also models appropriate behaviour throughout such that participants are encouraged to maintain a mode of engagement where they talk about their experience and the imagery, associations and feelings, rather than engaging in analysis or conversation. Sessions will run for a pre-determined time before a short break where the chairs are rearranged into a semi-circle, wherein participants are encouraged to reflect on what emerged in the previous ‘snowflake’ session and identify clusters of imagery, thoughts and feelings. These themes are then mapped on a flipchart by the facilitator.

The theoretical foundations for the method are primarily derived from object-relations theory, particularly the work of Bion (1970). Work from Winnicott (1971/2005) about potential space and play, and particularly Lorenzer’s (Lorenzer & Orban, 1978) notion of ‘scenic understanding’, further adds to the theoretical foundations. These ideas are allied – in the spirit of ‘theoretical hybridisation’ – to the Deleuzian concept of rhizomatic thinking (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988), in an attempt to make sense of the nature of the associative thinking emergent in the matrix. That is, the quality of material generated in a matrix is of a different order to that seen in a discursively oriented group discussion (focus group) or – as we remark upon in this chapter – might be seen in individual interviews.

The material in a matrix does not emerge in a linear or chronological fashion but instead flows through associations in moments of intensity and dispersion. Froggett et al. (2015) argue therefore that the rhizome described by Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 21) as ‘an acentred, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automation’ might serve as

an appropriate framework within which to situate this phenomenon. As such, data analysis is traditionally informed by object-relations theory within a broad Deleuzian psychosocial framework, with the aim being to detect tacit social processes and emotions along with more overt material. This operates through a mechanism described as a ‘hermeneutic vortex’ in which successive analytic panels incorporate wider contextual concerns into their analysis in an effort to articulate the ‘unthought known’ (Bollas, 1987).

### **The film project and evaluation methodology**

The impact agenda is now well established in the UK and increasingly so elsewhere around the world. Notwithstanding criticisms of some of the political imperatives driving this agenda, there is widespread acceptance of the need for researchers to engage in practices designed to maximise the impact of their work beyond academia: to engage with policy makers, practitioners and members of the public. The use of art in its myriad forms is starting to figure large as a valuable means for engaging a variety of audiences – particularly, the general public – with the potential for more powerful impact than the written word alone (Leavy, 2015). In collaboration with an artist, we produced a film series based on the findings from the Enduring Love research project on relationships. Enduring Love was designed to investigate how couples sustain their long-term relationships, focusing on the meanings and practices of relationship quality and stability.

The film project was designed to explore the potential of art as a means of engaging with a variety of publics on this topic. We gave the artist a book that included academic analysis of key findings (Gabb & Fink, 2015), and also briefed him in person, highlighting a number of key outcomes from the study. He then sought to immerse himself in the findings in order to produce his proposal for the film series. Through on-going dialogue, with much back and forth on content and form, the filmmaker produced a series of films entitled ‘Molecular Human’. The artist we worked with was Steve Geliot ([www.stevegeliot.com](http://www.stevegeliot.com)), an experienced artist who works primarily in producing public artworks, often using film and large-scale projections.

The series included 14 films, with each film in the series inspired by the research findings and representing different – though often overlapping – aspects of the findings. The film series was premiered at a launch event in The Vaults at the Royal Society of Arts House, just off the Strand in central London. The location provided easy access and a venue that was ideal for showing a film, with people able to move freely about the space whilst viewing the films. We decided to accompany the films at the launch with live music, with David McAlmont and Guy Davies devising a music set in liaison with Steve Geliot. It was felt that music would facilitate an immersive aesthetic experience with the audience engaged in sustained focus on the visual material rather than in conversation. Following a very brief introduction about the aim of the project people were left to view the films and enjoy the music.

Our evaluation strategy involved the use of a modified visual matrix exercise consisting of 16 people (including the facilitator) conducted immediately after the presentation of the film series, along with 15 individual interviews conducted within 3 weeks of the event. Participants were a self-selecting convenience sample who responded to an invitation email sent out prior to the launch event and through recruitment at the event itself. People were asked if they were willing to take part in a group exercise following the viewing of the films. We decided to use interviews alongside the visual matrix in order to balance group-level associative data with individual experiential accounts, especially given the interview remains the normative mode of data collection within phenomenological analysis, the findings of which are reported elsewhere (Langdrige, Gabb, & Lawson, 2019). The visual matrix was designed to generate group-level data and as such we did not collect data on individual participant demographics. We note, however, that the group reflected the make-up of the event audience, with it being well balanced for gender, age and ethnicity and reflective of the ethnically diverse population of London. The matrix was conducted in line with the standard visual matrix procedures described above.

## **Rethinking the visual matrix method**

### ***Re-imagining the dream space***

As mentioned previously, the theoretical and practical foundations of the visual matrix method have been built upon the ideas and techniques of social dreaming (Lawrence, 2003, 2005). Lawrence (2003) contrasts his method of social dreaming with the Freudian approach. He draws primarily on the work of Bion (1970) to provide the theoretical foundation that allows him to see dreams less bound to the psyche of any one individual, and instead the product of broader social and cultural processes. In a social dreaming matrix the participants will free associate such that any individual dream ‘sparks off associations among the participants that lead to the matrix becoming a multi-verse of meaning’ (Lawrence, 2003: 610). In addition, Lawrence conceives of dreams such that the discovery of individual latent meaning is no longer central. Instead, he questions whether dreaming might better be understood as a ‘normal human activity’ in which individuals are ‘capable of making their own interpretations’.

The notion of the matrix itself, where people come together to free associate, drawing upon the web of social and cultural resources that surround and situate us, derives from the group analytic work of Foulkes (1964, 1973; Foulkes & Anthony, 1957). As such, the matrix is that ‘substratum of feelings, thoughts and emotions that is integral to every social configuration and allows primordial images to appear from the social unconscious’ (Lawrence, 2003: 617). Affect is central here, as is the possibility for ‘play, in the sense that Winnicott (1971/2005) used the term, with the potential meanings of the dreams’ (Lawrence, 2003: 618). There are no predetermined meanings imposed on a dream nor any specific theoretical apparatus



employed in the analysis. Instead, participants ‘play’ – engage creatively – with the dream material as they freely associate with the emergent ideas and meanings.

The work of Boss (1957) in reimagining the Freudian approach to dream analysis shares some striking similarities to that of Lawrence, even though they had a different agenda and came from rather different theoretical perspectives. That is, Boss (1957) sought to re-imagine Freudian psychoanalytic dream work through a phenomenological lens, drawing principally on the thought of Heidegger (1927/1962), such that the focus is firmly on the manifest meaning – inflected by the social and cultural world – rather than individual latent content. His aim was not to develop a social model of dreaming but rather to develop a phenomenological approach to individual dream analysis that moves away from analysis of depth within an individual psyche towards an understanding of the person within their lifeworld. Scientific work on dreams offers some support for the argument of Boss in favour of focusing on manifest content, with evidence for the striking similarity between material in a person’s waking life and their dreams (Hall & Nordby, 1972). The key argument is how dreams must be explored as an aspect of our being-in-the-world that can only be understood in relation to the everyday concerns of waking life.

Boss (1957) developed two principles for dream analysis that draw directly on Heideggerian concepts: bearing and possibility. The first concerns the bearing of the dreamer to other persons and the wider world in a dream, which – like Lawrence – emphasises the way in which a dreamer is embedded in a culturally and historically situated relational context. The second principle involves exploration of possibilities in the dream that are ahead of the dreamer’s waking experience, so that we might identify how the dream may offer insight that opens up a person’s world. Unfortunately, Boss (1957) failed in large part to implement – and therefore demonstrate – an effective phenomenological method of analysis in practice, often drawing on extant psychoanalytic concepts and idiosyncratic notions (Gendlin, 1977; Vedfelt, 2002).

In the light of the need to implement a proper systematic phenomenological mode of analysis, the approach to existential dream analysis of Boss has been further developed by the first author (Langdridge, 2006, 2013; Langdridge, Gabb, & Lawson, 2019). He sought to achieve this by turning to work on phenomenological research methodology to explicate a more systematic way to conduct a phenomenological dream analysis. This involves a strict phenomenological stance along with incorporating consideration of the dimensions (or ‘fractions’) of the lifeworld – self, sociality, embodiment, temporality etc. – into the analytic process. Langdridge (2018: 59) argues that ‘dreams offer us a creative play space for working through our ontic concerns’, in which client and therapist work together to critically interrogate the material through a number of existential dimensions. The aim is that the use of the existential dimensions will help illuminate the meaning of dream material that might otherwise be out of immediate awareness.

It is worth clarifying what is meant here by the ‘meaning’ of material ‘out of immediate awareness’ within the context of a phenomenological perspective. The

visual matrix method that provides the technique being used here to generate data, and the social dreaming method upon which it is based, both adhere to a psychodynamic notion of the unconscious that is anathema to phenomenology. Phenomenology is concerned with consciousness first and foremost. However, contrary to a common misconception, the phenomenological focus on consciousness does not mean that all of consciousness is necessarily available or fully meaningful to a person (strictly, to *Dasein*, in Heidegger's terms). Heidegger (2001) argues strongly against any notion of an unconscious as a container into which material is inserted that might then re-emerge at some other time but his philosophical position allows for self-deception. The psychoanalyst M. Guy Thompson (2003, 2007, 2016) is particularly helpful here in his exploration of the relationship between Heidegger's thought and Freudian psychoanalysis. Thompson (2007: 147) explains that Heidegger is correct that

there is no 'unconscious', only *being*, which is another way of saying that what is hidden from us is not the 'content' of an unconscious portion of the mind, but rather the *meaning* of such and such a circumstance that, perhaps chronically, eludes us.

The Heideggerian position further refutes any mechanical notion of cause and effect and associated developmental theory (the 'why' of psychoanalysis), with (unconscious) motives for human action being fundamentally unknowable. As an aside, Thompson (2007) notes that Heidegger and Boss both admired the technical principles that Freud developed and underpin all subsequent psychotherapeutic practice, even if they disagreed with his theory.

Heidegger is not the only phenomenological philosopher to discuss the unconscious of course, but there is not the space here for further exposition. It is, however, worth mentioning how the unconscious may also be rethought, at least in part, through Sartre's (2003) notion of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith), effectively a form of self-deception. Sartre's rejection of the Freudian unconscious, like that of Heidegger, is often misconstrued as a rejection of anything that is not immediately available to consciousness when in fact it is actually a rejection of the reification of the unconscious as an objective entity, something that many contemporary psychoanalysts would agree with. In these existential terms, material that is not immediately or readily available to consciousness operates as a mode of self-deception, a deception that emerges through our *being*, the perpetual confrontation with nothingness and a desire to escape anxiety, guilt and shame (Holzhey-Kunz, 2014). Dreams, and psychosocial methods like the visual matrix technique, may therefore be useful means within a phenomenological perspective for accessing this material that is not otherwise readily available to any individual subject.

The inspiration for incorporating the dimensions of existence within dream analysis comes primarily from work developing phenomenological methodology, most particularly Ashworth (2003, 2016), though Van Manen (1990, 2014) also suggests a similar addition to his hermeneutic phenomenological method. Ashworth argues for the explicit use of dimensions (or 'fractions' in his terms) of the lifeworld in order to

deepen a phenomenological analysis. Heidegger (1927/1962) and the later Husserl (1954/1970) both stressed the need for experience to be understood ‘within a world’, which was described as the ‘lifeworld’ by Husserl. The lifeworld describes any individual’s own subjective experience of day-to-day life but whilst it is idiosyncratic it will share certain common features with the lifeworld of other human beings. These common features can be found described in the literature of the existential phenomenological philosophers Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, De Beauvoir and others, and may be described as ‘dimensions’ or ‘fractions’ of the lifeworld.

Existential dream analysis may similarly employ the dimensions of the lifeworld to better enable therapist and client to work together to make sense of the meaning of a dream within a broad phenomenological framework (Langdridge, 2006, 2013, 2018). Whilst the dimensions (or fractions) underpin all experience, they are not necessarily all salient within any one analysis. They will carry different weights with different topics and the phenomenological rule of equalisation is particularly valuable here in ensuring that we do not presume which dimension will be most apparent in our analysis with any particular topic.

Each fraction imposes, as it were, its own ‘aura,’ or theme, on the lifeworld without being detached from the other fractions. The whole lifeworld is mine, just as the whole lifeworld gains its meaning from my sociality; the whole lifeworld is relative to my embodiment; the whole lifeworld is temporal and spatial; the whole lifeworld has its priorities and saliences which mark out the individual’s cares and concerns, their projects; the whole lifeworld bears the marks of the categories and grammatical dispositions of the culture and language, and the whole lifeworld, as it is lived through, is experienced affectively in terms of the moods which the entities (entities-for-me) disclose. Each fraction is essential, and each melds in with the others. Yet we can think each one separately, and view the lifeworld in its light.

*(Ashworth, 2016: 24)*

Ashworth (2016) provides detail about each concept but for those less familiar with them they are, in brief, as follows:

- Selfhood refers to our subjective understanding of who we are, our sense of identity or selfhood.
- Sociality concerns the way that human beings are fundamentally relational beings, with relationships at the heart of our experience of the world.
- Embodiment relates to our embodied state as human beings and how this features in our experience, including consideration of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and disability.
- Temporality refers to the way that existence is temporally structured such that we are always ‘living in time’, and how the sense of time might be phenomenologically apparent within any experience.

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- Spatiality refers to a person's understanding of their position in the world through geography.
- Project is that aspect of a situation that relates to a person's ability to carry out activities which they have committed to and which they believe are central in their life, in other words our fundamental concerns.
- Discourse concerns the way that language structures experience and how our experience may be understood through particular social and cultural discourses.
- Moods are about 'mood as atmosphere'. That is, for every event in the lifeworld there will be an associated mood. We must be careful not to assume that this is the possession of any individual but instead to acknowledge mood as the broader affect accompanying the various situations that we encounter in daily life.

The use of the dimensions must therefore be driven by the data, whether that data are the substance of a dream or the product of a visual matrix exercise. This additional analytic element is incorporated into the latter stage of a more traditional phenomenological analysis, whether that is through breaking down the text into meaning-units, as we see with the work of Giorgi (2009), or into themes, as we see with Van Manen (1990), and others adopting a more hermeneutic approach to the analysis. Below we present an outline of the existential phenomenological analytic strategy we have developed, along with a summary of the analysis. Through this, we aim to demonstrate the value of a phenomenological stance engaging the existential dimensions to an analysis of visual matrix material.

### **An existential phenomenological analysis of the visual matrix**

There are numerous phenomenological methods but we suggest that a hermeneutic approach is likely to be most productive for an analysis of material of the sort produced within a matrix exercise (e.g. Van Manen, 1990, 2014). The flexibility, freedom and creativity – inspired in large part by the philosophy of Gadamer – most commonly associated with these approaches best match the nature of the data being collected through a visual matrix exercise. Hermeneutic phenomenological methods inspired by Gadamer's work (1975) generally provide a guide to analysis rather than a rigid set of rules to follow and are thus heuristic (Langdridge, 2007). The focus is on how language reveals different aspects of the lifeworld, within particular cultural and historical limits, through a fusion of horizons between participant and researcher. This entails an investigation where one engages the epoché and moves continuously between part and whole in a hermeneutic circle in order to derive the thematic structure of the phenomenon. Van Manen (1990) describes six basic steps that we followed here:

1. Turn to the phenomenon and commit to it.
2. Investigate experience as lived (rather than conceptually).
3. Reflect on the essential themes which characterise the phenomenon.

4. Describe the phenomenon through writing.
5. Maintain a strong and oriented disciplinary relation to the phenomenon.
6. Balance the research context by examining parts and whole.

The aim is not to translate the theoretical commitments of the visual matrix method into phenomenology but rather to appropriate the method and then rethink that method in terms of phenomenology. This does require some dialogue so that theoretical tensions may be resolved but not a direct translation of the extant (object relations and Deleuzian) theory into phenomenology. As such, the key theoretical matters are those which most directly relate to the meaning of the data collected as it exists in a particular form and analysis being conducted. With these limits we must therefore make sense of data from group free association and explain how this material might be analysed from a phenomenological perspective. And whilst there may be some productive theoretical links to be made between phenomenology, psychodynamic theory and Deleuzian and broader process philosophy (see, for instance, Manley, 2010; Thompson, 2016), that is not the primary focus of this work. Our aim here, as set out at the beginning of the chapter, is to explore how we might take inspiration from psychosocial work, such as that on the visual matrix method, to move phenomenological research beyond the individual.

The analysis therefore eschews any exploration of phenomena beyond the ‘what’ and ‘how’, in which an analyst adopts a hermeneutic of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970) when investigating ‘why’ such material might occur. The focus is firmly centred on a phenomenological analysis of the manifest meaning captured in the transcript and flipchart record of the visual matrix event. In addition, such an analysis may draw on the dimensions of the lifeworld to further enrich the analysis, as we do here. Our own phenomenological analysis of the visual matrix, and particularly the individual interviews, is reported in detail elsewhere (Langdridge, Gabb, & Lawson, 2019) but we summarise the analysis of the visual matrix here, as that is the primary concern of this chapter, before moving on to discuss the use of existential dimensions designed to further deepen the phenomenological analysis. The theoretical and practical process of phenomenological analysis adopted herein – our phenomenological alternative to the ‘rhizomatic’ method of Froggett et al., (2015, 2014) – for an analysis of group-level material was as follows:

1. Each person in the visual matrix is the locus of their own experiential process in line with Husserl (1954/1970) and clarified in Schutz (1932/1967). They view the material and thus act as a centre of phenomenological experience. That experience is ontologically singular but ontically collective in the terms of the natural attitude. Whilst every participant is a singular experiencing being, the data collection process outlined in (2) below frames the type of material produced, especially in the context of the subject not necessarily having complete knowledge of their own subjectivity.
2. Participation in the visual matrix encourages an imaginative group process in which imagery and affect are prioritised, along with a sense of group reverie.

This qualitatively alters the type of phenomenological material produced such that we gain access to material that is less readily available to or anchored within individual personal history. We know from experience, theoretical argument and empirical literature that we gain somewhat different data from individual interviews, couple interviews and focus groups (e.g. Potter & Hepburn, 2005). We also know that we get different data from focus groups and visual matrix groups (Froggett, Manley, & Roy, 2015).

3. The visual matrix data collection process is aligned with the notions of empathy of Stein (1917/1989, 1922/1970) and of the group person of Scheler (1913/2009; see also Szanto, 2016), along with material that might be less readily available to individual subjects (e.g. material subject to self-deception in Sartrean terms or, in Heidegger's terms, our own relationship to our being). That is, we are seeking to encourage the production of material that is not so readily available to articulation by an individual through the use of the visual matrix method as well as material that is more inherently intersubjective.
4. Data are collected by the facilitator and through recording of the visual matrix exercise. These data can then be subject to a phenomenological analysis in which the 'ownness' of the experience of the material is returned to a single individual in the usual phenomenological manner. The data represent something of the natural attitude of this particular group of people, giving voice to their collective experience of the initial prompt material. In order to make sense of this material we must engage the epoché and reduction as we would with data from an individual's experience, setting aside our own individual natural attitude in the process (Husserl, 1954/1970). The difference here is that we do not have the usual initial sense-making process of the individual centre stage but instead some version of group personhood and empathic shared experience. We gain access to the essence of an empathic shared experience and/or a sense of group personhood, a neglected aspect of experience within traditional phenomenological research in psychology.

The phenomenological analysis of the visual matrix exercise revealed a fascinating picture of affect in which images and sensations flowed across a number of domains. The analysis focused on the transcript of the matrix exercise itself and also the summary discussion at the end of the matrix that took place where dominant themes are written on a flipchart (Figure 17.1), and was conducted by the first author.

The core group concerns expressed through the visual matrix exercise, reported in Langdridge, Gabb and Lawson (2019), were as follows:

There was talk of temporality, objects and relationships enduring over time, including the potential for positive change even in the context of social and emotional precarity. The theme of embodied touch figured large in the social imagination of the matrix. This was connected to images of bodies engaged in dance, the ritualistic making of cups of tea or in some other everyday act of domesticity. This evoked feelings of

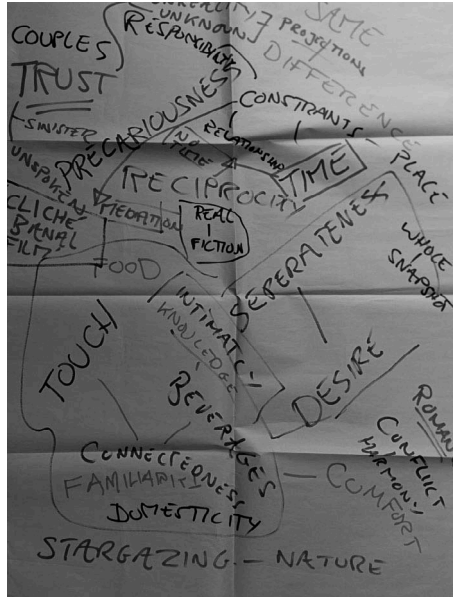


Figure 17.1 Visual matrix flipchart.

comfort and familiarity, trust, intimacy, and desire alongside separateness and suspicion about the potential sinister and/or unspoken content. Talk circled around the notions of difference and sameness, conflict versus harmony, the real versus the fictional, and narrative drama versus the poetic snapshot. People adopted either side of these polarised positions whilst others resisted or opposed them. Questions of technology and the material world mediating interpersonal connections were raised and inflected by generational difference, alongside concerns about filmic cliché and representation of the banal. People felt privileged to witness the intimate lives of others and identified with stories of intimacy, bonding, and struggle, whilst others craved more ‘edgy’ and obvious signs of argument, conflict and anger.

*Langdridge, Gabb, & Lawson, 2019, pp. 591–592*

### **The existential dimensions of the visual matrix**

A number of existential dimensions emerged as particularly significant in the analysis of the visual matrix material, including sociality, embodiment, moodedness and spatiality. Each of them helped focus attention on underlying aspects of the group experience of viewing the film series and the audience engagement. As mentioned above, whilst they may be discussed separately in theoretical terms, they

are not necessarily separable in empirical terms and, as such, are discussed in relation to each other below.

As one might expect, empathic sociality figured prominently in the visual matrix (Stein, 1917/1989). The focus of the film series was on enduring relationships and discussion of various aspects of relationships was central in the matrix. When issues of embodiment were invoked they were inevitably – and perhaps not unexpectedly – also intertwined with sociality. That is, bodies were rarely discussed through the lens of any one individual body but much more as ‘bodies-in-relation’, with social relations similarly described in deeply embodied terms. A central and highly pertinent motif mentioned repeatedly throughout the matrix was that of hands touching.

Very strong image for me that ran through most of the films, that kept coming back to me, was the hands touching each other, hands reaching out across space and making contact with each other, and that seemed to connect an awful lot of the different ideas and concepts of the films together for me, that repeated motif of touch and contact in relationships, that resonated very strongly.

Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962; 1964/1968) uses the notion of touching hands himself in his philosophy of embodiment. Merleau-Ponty’s entire philosophy implicates the body through his notion of the *body-subject* and the way that all subjectivity (or selfhood) must be understood through our embodied being-in-the-world. That is, he based many of his arguments against the pervasive dualisms of the day (mind–body; self–world; inside–outside) on a phenomenology of embodiment. For Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) our bodies are not objects that can be separated from consciousness; the world only makes sense through our embodied perception of the world. However, it is in his last and tantalisingly unfinished work *Visible and Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968) where touching hands figure centrally. In this work, Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968: 136) seeks to fundamentally question body–world dualism through his notion of *flesh*:

the world is at the heart of our flesh ... once a body–world relationship is recognised, there is a ramification of the world and a correspondence between its inside and my outside and my inside and its outside.

He uses the example of touching hands to demonstrate the *double belongingness* described above. If we touch our left hand with our right hand when one hand is touching then the other is touched and vice versa. The experience of touch is not reducible to one hand or the other with a double belongingness represented through his notion of chiasm (from ‘chiasma’, the crossing over of two structures). That is, there is an inextricable relationship between body and world, with each folded into the other, with subjectivity located in this chiasm of touching and being touched (Figure 17.2).





Figure 17.2 Still from 'Digital Life'.

Participants in the visual matrix explored the chiasm of flesh that is inherent to subjectivity and sociality through a variety of tropes, notably through the notion of touching. This was, at times, mediated by the material (spatial) world of objects whether a glass shower screen or technology.

And for me the hands and that was almost a yearning to be touched, to be very connected with someone. And so when I saw the screen between them, it came as, I could see quite a can never quite meet, and yet put them down, kind of pretty well the same. I know there is, there seemed to be, I think that kind of for me sense of the alienation that you kind of feel a lot of the time, social media and yet there's a huge gulf between us in some ways.

Intimacy was expressed in the matrix in two registers: intimacy between the people within the film series and intimacy between members of the audience. With both, mood – or attunement in Heidegger's (Heidegger, 1927/1962) terms – was critical to the meaning being expressed. Heidegger (Heidegger, 1927/1962) argues that all experience is through the mood of *Dasein* (the 'there of being', his notion of subjectivity) and in the matrix this operated at two levels. There was exploration of mood within the filmic material and also mood within the audience, with them connecting at times and not others. People were swept up in the mood, carried along in the flow, or detached from their experiential present as a result of it, suddenly conscious of their position in space in relation to the 'Others' in the films.

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I thought there was a sort of wistfulness of them, just a mood that went through them, like all those relationships, there's a sort of ... not sadness ... but sort of ... gentleness, air of loss or something, it seemed.

It was funny watching the intimacy, talking about something very intimate, it felt like sort of ... not quite voyeuristic but like watching and being in a room with people where you have no sense of couple-dom at all, and yet you're watching couples (apart from the threesome) so you're watching these couples and yet collectively in a whole load of people there's no sense of couple-dom at all around me, and that's, that felt a bit ... I was conscious of that somehow.

Speaking of people in the room, I did see some smiles of people ... same-sex rel ... people in same-sex relationships being intimate, and watching same-sex and feeling, feeling the joy of it.

The sense and importance of 'Otherness' as a key constituent of sociality emerged at times within the matrix, albeit in somewhat different form to the individual interviews. In the individual interviews many participants were preoccupied with the machinery of film production and technical decisions about representation and diversity. Whilst there was some similar talk in the matrix, this was minimised by the associative format and instead there was an opportunity to express the sense of *jouissance* (joy) (Figure 17.3) that may emerge through a face-to-face encounter with Otherness (Levinas, 1969).

That is, the asymmetry inherent in the 'call of the other' (Levinas, 1969, 1981, 1985) offers up the possibility of an ethical engagement in which one's own



*Figure 17.3* Still from 'A Proper Cup'.

selfhood is radically transformed (Krycka, 2015). An encounter with Otherness is at the heart of sociality for Levinas (1969, 1981, 1985), with Otherness itself critical for awareness of one's own ethical responsibility, one's own subjectivity. The first precondition for learning, for engaging more ethically in the world – in these terms – is the presence of the Other as teacher.

I was relieved to see some different cultures. I felt that there were some rare moments of actually ... where the lady was removing her scarf I felt it was such an intimate moment, the lady removing her scarf which is something I don't ordinarily see, and another aspect was that I had anticipation that something more, that there was going to be some ... it was gonna escalate, and it didn't, and I just felt left with a ... a kind of surprise with myself, that I'm so used to seeing things escalate into more, and that it's actually so great to see intimacy in, just for a few moments of intimacy and for it to be safe through those films, and how rare and precious that was.

## **Conclusions**

This article has made a theoretical case for how we might take inspiration from the visual matrix method to work with group-level material within an (existential) phenomenological perspective. The foundation of the visual matrix method in social dreaming offers useful parallels to the (existential) phenomenological approach to dream analysis in the move away from an analysis of individual psychic content towards an analysis of manifest content (the 'what' and 'how' of experience). The visual matrix method has proven valuable in generating more affect-laden and group-level data than produced through individual interviews or focus groups and so provides a particularly useful method for the production of data beyond the individual. This chapter has shown how it is possible to rethink a (psychodynamic) psychosocial method through the theory and methodology of phenomenological psychology.

Our analysis brought many aspects of the phenomenological experience into sharp focus across the dimensions of sociality, embodiment, moodedness and spatiality. By incorporating the existential dimensions, as proposed in some phenomenological methods (Ashworth, 2016; Van Manen, 1990, 2014) and utilised in dream analysis by Langdridge (2006, 2013, 2018), we have shown how it is possible to work with group-level data from a phenomenological perspective. Our findings have shown how the dimensions intertwine as participants associate to the film material in the matrix. Their affective engagement was inflected with notions of an empathic embodied relationality, expressed most vividly through the trope of touching hands, and subjectivity being brought into focus through Otherness. That is, the matrix expressed a group-level concern with sociality in which the call of the (asymmetric) 'Other' acts as a teacher by confronting us with an awareness of our own subjectivity. This relationality was also perceived to be mediated through the material world, whether through a plate of glass or an iPad screen, with

participants struggling with and then determining that this material mediation need not diminish the potency of our embodied intimate relating.

It is worth noting that there were some interesting similarities and differences in the material generated by the visual matrix exercise when compared with the individual interviews. A central theme of the individual interviews concerned the sense of identification, in a variety of forms (character, narrative and apparatus) with the material (Langdrige, Gabb, & Lawson, 2019). Identification is of course an aspect of subjectivity and this was almost completely absent in the visual matrix. Identification and other matters of subjectivity are in many ways individual ontic concerns and so not necessarily the material to expect from a visual matrix designed to facilitate group-level association.

Other key concerns that emerged in the individual interviews were whether the films were 'real' or fictional representations and issues of diversity (Langdrige, Gabb, & Lawson, 2019). This exercised a number of the interviewees and whilst the topics were touched upon in the visual matrix they were not dwelt on for any length of time. As we hoped, the visual matrix itself resisted any individual working through of more cognitive matters about the process of filmmaking. In contrast, the key dimensions within the visual matrix were those concerned with embodiment, sociality and mood, with all three inevitably linked with the other. The visual materials presented in the film series are of course inherently relational phenomena and so were more likely to emerge within the relational context of the visual matrix but it is still interesting and also reassuring to note how the visual matrix encouraged the production of more group-level and affect-oriented data than we saw in the individual interviews.

Finally, we should note how this novel approach provides us with a way to move away from a focus on the individual within phenomenological methodology. This is not uncontroversial, as many phenomenologists would – with good reason – argue that this approach is not phenomenological at all. It is quite true that the methodology described herein does not fit within a classic Husserlian understanding of phenomenology. It pushes the boundaries of phenomenology very far and some might think too far. As mentioned above, our aim here is not to fight over these definitional boundaries but rather to think through how we might be able to move beyond a focus only on individual consciousness to explore group-level phenomena, particularly affective (mood-oriented) material, within a broad phenomenological perspective. If this must be described as 'informed by phenomenology' rather than a (social) group-level phenomenological method, then so be it. The important thing is that we find ways to gather data that honour experience, whether of one individual or a collective and its mood. Beyond the theoretical focus on individual experience, phenomenological methods have also been over-reliant on semi-structured interviews as the primary means for data collection (Langdrige, 2007). Indeed, semi-structured interviews have become almost hegemonic as a means of data collection amongst many of the most popular interpretive phenomenological methods. The modified visual matrix described herein by contrast produces group-level data that we have demonstrated can be subject to an existential phenomenological analysis, such that we may better grasp

group-level experience as it relates to an object of study. As such, the existential-phenomenological development of the visual matrix method described herein opens up new possibilities for more group-oriented phenomenological research within the human sciences.

## Note

1 Levinas (1969, 1981, 1985) is another figure who offers considerable scope for the development of a social phenomenology (see Dimitrova, 2016).

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# RISK COMMUNICATION AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

## ‘Fuzzy-felt’, visual games and group discussion of complex issues

*Angela Cassidy and John Maule*

### **Introduction**

Psychological research has shown that the general public often perceives and acts in the face of risk in ways that are very different from those responsible for assessing, managing and communicating these risks (see, e.g., Fischhoff, 2009 for a review). Powell and Leiss (1997) interpreted these differences in terms of two languages of risk: a ‘public’ language grounded in social and intuitive knowledge (see also Tulloch and Lupton, 2003) and an expert or ‘scientific’ language grounded in scientific, specialised and statistical knowledge. ‘Public’ risk language takes account of qualitative aspects of the threat (e.g. the amount of control people perceive they have; how familiar/unfamiliar it seems) whereas ‘scientific’ risk language is founded on formal models that define risk as the product of the likelihood of some event and the impact, value or utility of its outcome (French *et al.*, 2009). These differences have important implications that have, until comparatively recently, been largely ignored by risk communicators. On the one hand, public audiences often have difficulty making sense of the specialised, statistical basis of professional risk assessments, so tend to ignore communications based on them, or draw conclusions that are different from those intended. Until recently, risk communicators have aimed to resolve such problems by investigating how people interpret statistical risk information, and then sought to improve the presentation of this information accordingly (e.g. Berry, 2004; Gigerenzer, 2002). On the other hand, such communications often fail to address issues of concern to the multiple and varied ‘publics’ they address,<sup>1</sup> so are thought to be irrelevant and are ignored, contributing to problems of mistrust and miscommunication between experts and publics (see, e.g. Wynne, 1995).



A potential solution to these difficulties can be provided by replacing this one-way 'sender to receiver' model of information transfer with a model of communication as a two-way process, in which audiences take an active role in constructing the meaning of a message (Lewenstein, 1995; McQuail, 2005). This also leads to recognition of the need for partnership and dialogue between experts, policy makers, wider publics and stakeholder groups with particular interests in the issues of concern (e.g. Fischhoff, 1995). A key focus of this work has been the development of methods and processes for enabling public and stakeholder participation in risk management and decision making, such as citizens' juries and decision-making workshops (Rowe and Frewer, 2005). A potential benefit of this approach is that it facilitates greater dialogue and understanding of the issues for all those involved and has the potential to improve communications by taking into account the different conceptualisations of risk. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the question of how to apply this 'partnership' model, and the outputs of participation exercises, to develop more effective and sensitive communication of risk issues.

A notable exception to this lack of interest in partnership models is provided by the Mental Models Approach (MMA) (Morgan *et al.*, 2002). This approach builds upon the idea that people internally represent the world in terms of small-scale 'mental models' of external reality and the actions that they might take ( Craik, 1943). The act of comprehension is thought to yield a mental model (Johnson-Laird, 1975) and, once established, models are used to simulate behaviours and their possible outcomes (e.g. Schwartz and Black, 1996). Importantly for the MMA, this body of work also confirms that experts and novices often have different models for understanding the same issue (e.g. Gentner and Gentner, 1983). With this body of work in mind, the MMA to risk communication involves eliciting and comparing 'expert' and 'lay' mental models of a hazard to identify misunderstandings and errors in lay understanding. Comparing the identified mental models allows the researcher to then construct risk communications that rectify these shortcomings (Morgan *et al.*, 2002). The advantages of this approach are that it has a sound theoretical base in psychology, is user-centred and that it has successfully been applied across a variety of domains (e.g. Cox *et al.*, 2003; Niewohner *et al.*, 2004).

However, the traditional cognitivist view of knowledge which the MMA operates upon cannot take account of the ways in which even expert risk knowledge is contingent, partial and socially constructed, as a broad range of psychological research on risk has shown (see, for example, Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1992). Therefore we have developed and adapted the MMA, integrating it with a social representations model of risk knowledge (Breakwell, 2001). Unlike mental models, which are seen as held solely in the individual's mind, social representations theory can account for how risk knowledge is built, held and communicated collectively, allowing greater potential for a partnership model of risk communication (Joffe, 2003). Since risk knowledge exists at both individual and social levels, our approach assumes that both perspectives are necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of risk knowledge and communication (Barker *et al.*, 2010).

Working from this modified approach, and taking a more nuanced approach to expert/lay differences, we have adapted the MMA to investigate how risk across the food chain is conceptualised by a range of stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> These groups included scientists and risk policy managers; farmers; non-governmental organisation (NGO) campaigners; food industry workers; and ‘interested publics’ for food risk.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the MMA, we have sought to avoid privileging ‘expert’ perspectives on risk – either those of risk experts or our own.

However, our initial attempts to elicit and compare the mental models of these highly diverse groups ran into difficulties. We ran pilot in-depth interviews and focus groups on the topic and found that lay groups, and to some extent expert groups, generated outputs that were very limited in content. All groups found it hard to develop a model of the food chain and discuss the relevant risks at the same time, particularly the novice groups who were not used to organising their knowledge and talking about food risk in this way. Thus, the data generated were impoverished and failed to reflect how our participants thought about the issues involved. Thus, we needed to find a satisfactory method for eliciting the mental models of these diverse groups that could manage the very different types and degrees of experience and expertise in food chain risks that each had. To overcome this problem we developed an innovative and what proved to be highly productive visual research method for use in group interview situations.

This chapter outlines the development of this method, and demonstrates its value when investigating how different groups of people conceptualise complex situations such as risks in food production. We begin by describing the broader case study which our work contributed to, alongside our central research questions and the challenges we encountered in attempting to answer these questions. We then outline the potential of visual methods to meet these challenges, and describe the development of our approach (the ‘fuzzy-felt method’). We discuss participants’ interactions with the method, speculate on why using images may have helped them engage with our research topic and discuss some of the problems we encountered. Finally, we outline avenues for further enquiry in risk research and visual methods, and explore potential applications of the method in domains beyond psychological and social research.

## **Case study**

The research was carried out as part of a larger multidisciplinary project addressing natural and social scientific approaches to managing and communicating food chain risks (Barker *et al.*, 2010; Shepherd, 2008; Shepherd *et al.*, 2006).<sup>4</sup> As described above, our research focused specifically on participatory risk communication, but in line with the wider project we employed a case-study approach, looking at the food chain for two specific foods – apples and chicken. Our central research questions were:

1. How do different stakeholder groups understand the risks associated with the production, distribution and consumption of food?
2. What risks would they identify in the food chain and where would they place them?
3. How do they think such risks should be managed and mitigated?

These questions could be rephrased as: what are the differences and similarities between different stakeholders' mental models of food chain risk?<sup>5</sup> Our interests in the social aspects of risk knowledge and inter-group comparisons led us to conclude that group interviewing would be a viable option: as well as the more general benefits of focus group research (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1998), it seemed that in a group of known peers, participants would be more likely to reflect frankly on the sometimes sensitive risk issues we were interested in.<sup>6</sup> The group context would also help mitigate the sense of putting participants 'on the spot' about their knowledge of food risk, and lessen any felt pressure to give the 'correct' answers.

Therefore we ran several pilot interview groups, addressing our research questions. As indicated above, it became apparent that the group discussions rapidly moved away from our central research questions about risk in the food chain. This was due in part to lay participants' unfamiliarity with systems of modern food production. However, we also found that both lay and some 'expert' participants had difficulty engaging with the extreme complexity of these systems and identifying and talking about interactions between different parts of them. It seemed that groups needed a great deal of intervention from the facilitator in order to stay 'on topic', which was extremely problematic for our commitment to avoid researcher framings of the interview process. To overcome these problems we explored the possibility of using visual research methods, which we believed had the potential to engage with these kinds of difficulties.

### **Potential of visual methods**

The use of visual methods in social research is becoming increasingly common, although at present the work is scattered across many research fields and specific areas of study, leading to little methodological or intellectual coherence in how they are employed. Visual methods are probably best established in anthropology (Banks, 2001) and educational/developmental research with children (Prosser and Burke, 2007); however, as the contributions to this volume attest, they are becoming increasingly popular in general psychology research. Broadly speaking there are three main approaches to visual research: analysis of (previously produced) images, use of preselected images in interviews or focus groups to elicit discussion, and participant production of images (Prosser and Loxley, 2008).

As described above, our research on food chain risks needed a method which would:

1. draw out participants who regarded themselves as unfamiliar with food production and risk issues;

2. enable participants to think about and explore in depth the complexities of the modern food production systems;
3. allow an equal basis for comparison between participants with different degrees of familiarity, experience and expertise with food risk issues;
4. not frame the research in terms of 'expert' understandings of food risk;
5. contribute towards a participatory approach to risk communication.

Asking participants to produce their own images (through drawing, model-making, photography or video), either prior to or during an interview situation, is a research technique which we felt had the potential to fulfil these requirements for two major reasons.

First, many visual research methods work by helping participants to structure or develop their thoughts in some way. At a basic level, images have a simple 'elicitation' role in interviews by providing a stimulus for discussing the research topic. Participant-produced images can also be helpful when working with people who are less articulate, such as young children (e.g. Dove *et al.*, 1999), or when broaching particularly sensitive subjects (Wakefield and Underwager, 1998). Gauntlett (2007) argues that the creative process can help participants to reflect more deeply on topics that they may not have thought a great deal about beforehand (which is often the case with food risks). Drawing can also help people structure and organise their thoughts more systematically, and such images can in turn play an elicitation role in group discussion. Research in this vein has used drawing to explore people's understanding of how ideas connect together, through the creation of 'concept maps'. This idea has been used extensively in educational practice (e.g. Buzan, 1995), as well as in management research, where the resulting 'rich pictures' are used to understand organisations better and therefore identify how to make them more efficient (French *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, it seemed possible that asking participants to create images of the food chain and of food chain risks might help them explore the issue at greater depth than we had managed previously.

Second, some researchers argue that visual-based methods are inherently less directed and not filtered through researchers' expectations, because the creative activity acts in the place of researcher questioning and prompts. For this reason, these methods are also frequently utilised by practitioners of participatory research who aim to increase the meaning, validity and 'ownership' of social research for the participants themselves, which can in turn aid participants in organising collectively to effect social and political change (Kesby, 2000). Therefore, we anticipated that a visual method would help us in our stated goals of avoiding 'expert' framings of the research topic, and of working towards a participatory approach to risk communication.

### **Development of the 'fuzzy-felt method'**

As described above, we had run several pilot interview groups designed to elicit participants' mental models of food chain risks, but had run into difficulties in engaging with the research topic, and in particular with exploring the complexities

of contemporary systems of food production. From reading the literature on visual research methods, it seemed that using images, and in particular asking participants to draw while thinking about food chain risk, might help us overcome these problems. Therefore a second pilot study was run, in which small groups (2–4) of participants were presented with a piece of A3 paper and asked to draw an image of the food chain for a particular item – the series of connections any food goes through on its journey from ‘farm to plate’. Five trial groups were run, each with a different type of participant (farmers; food scientists; green campaigners; young professionals; parents of young children). Once the picture was complete, participants were then asked to use red pens to identify and locate what they thought the main risks were on that food chain, and finally to use green pens to identify how and where those risks could be managed.

We found this approach to be partially successful: the task helped participants focus on our central issue of enquiry (risk in the food chain), and supported them in a process of ‘thoughtful reflection’ about the complex issues at hand (Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006: 84). The resulting images were complex, interesting and ‘rich’ in their content (see Figure 18.1 for an example; detail given in Figure 18.2) and group discussion was longer, more developed and much more focused on the research topic than in the earlier pilot. Crucially, we also found that *very little intervention* was required from the interviewer, aside from the central prompts asking for an image of the food chain, and for the key risks and mitigations present. However, we found that participants’ interactions with the drawing task were variable, both within and between the groups: while some took to the idea well, drew lots and talked more, others seemed wary and were reluctant to engage in the drawing activity. There were two primary reasons for this reluctance: participants expressed embarrassment at doing something ‘artistic’ without considering themselves to be talented at that activity, especially in a group context; and confusion/scepticism at how the task comprised a valid piece of research. In addition, once engaged in the task, the degree to which people used drawing/images was highly variable, with some choosing to mostly talk, others to write ‘labels’ but not use images and others to draw pictures. This variability presented problems for how representative the data were of all group members, as well as raising concerns for how to analyse validly and interpret the data across groups in order to answer our primary research questions.

We did, however, notice some consistency in the images produced – all the groups created some sort of interconnected network to represent the food chain, with specific elements, usually objects, places or processes (e.g. tractors; chickens; warehouses), at the node points of these networks. Inspired by this and the child’s game, fuzzy-felt – which involves arranging a series of pre-cut felt shapes on to a textured board to create larger ‘scene’ pictures – a version of the game was developed for use in our group interviewing.<sup>7</sup> This involved sticking icons of the food chain elements on to a large piece of paper and connecting them with hand-drawn lines. As with Gauntlett’s (2007) research using Lego figures to explore identity issues, we anticipated that such an activity would help people engage with food risks in a creative, but less challenging, more ‘playlike’ fashion. In addition,

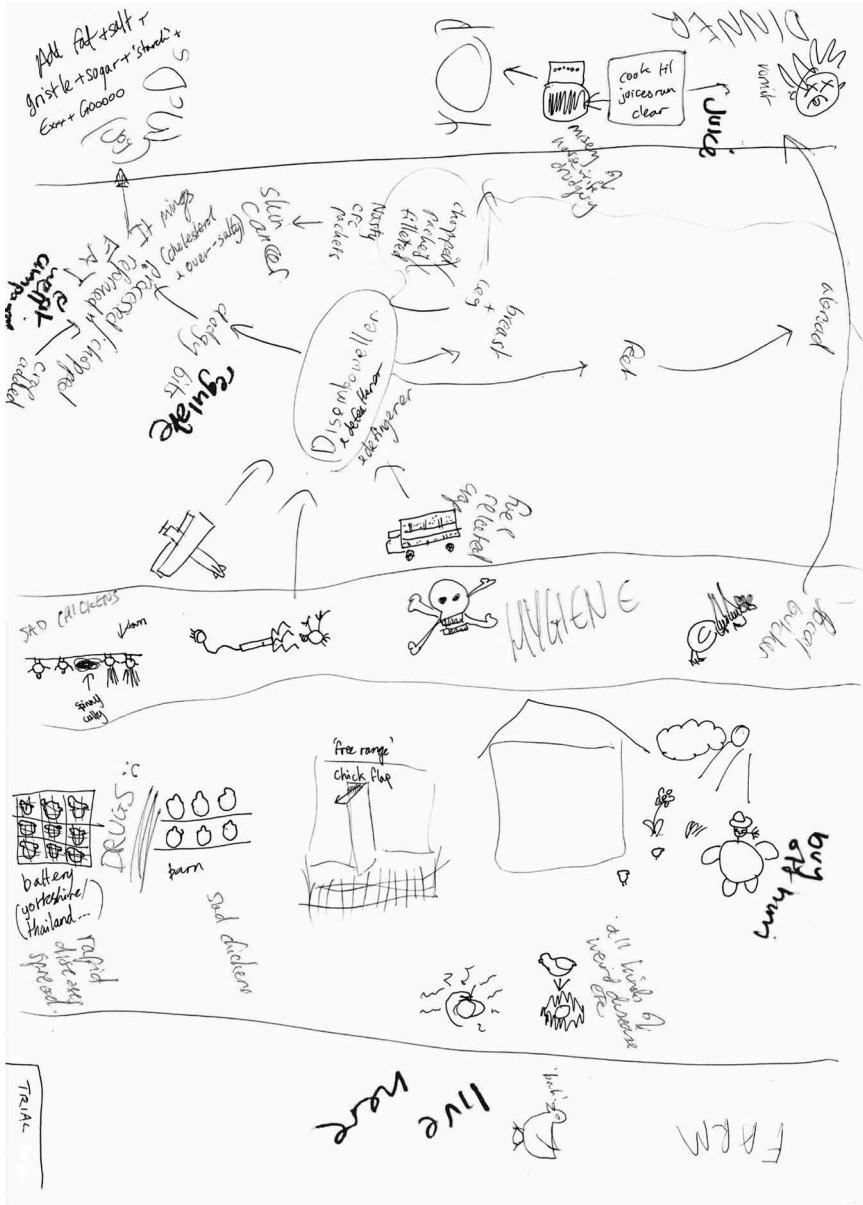


Figure 18.1 Example freehand food chain drawing. 'Red' pen (risks) appears as light grey; 'green' pen (mitigations) appears as dark grey.

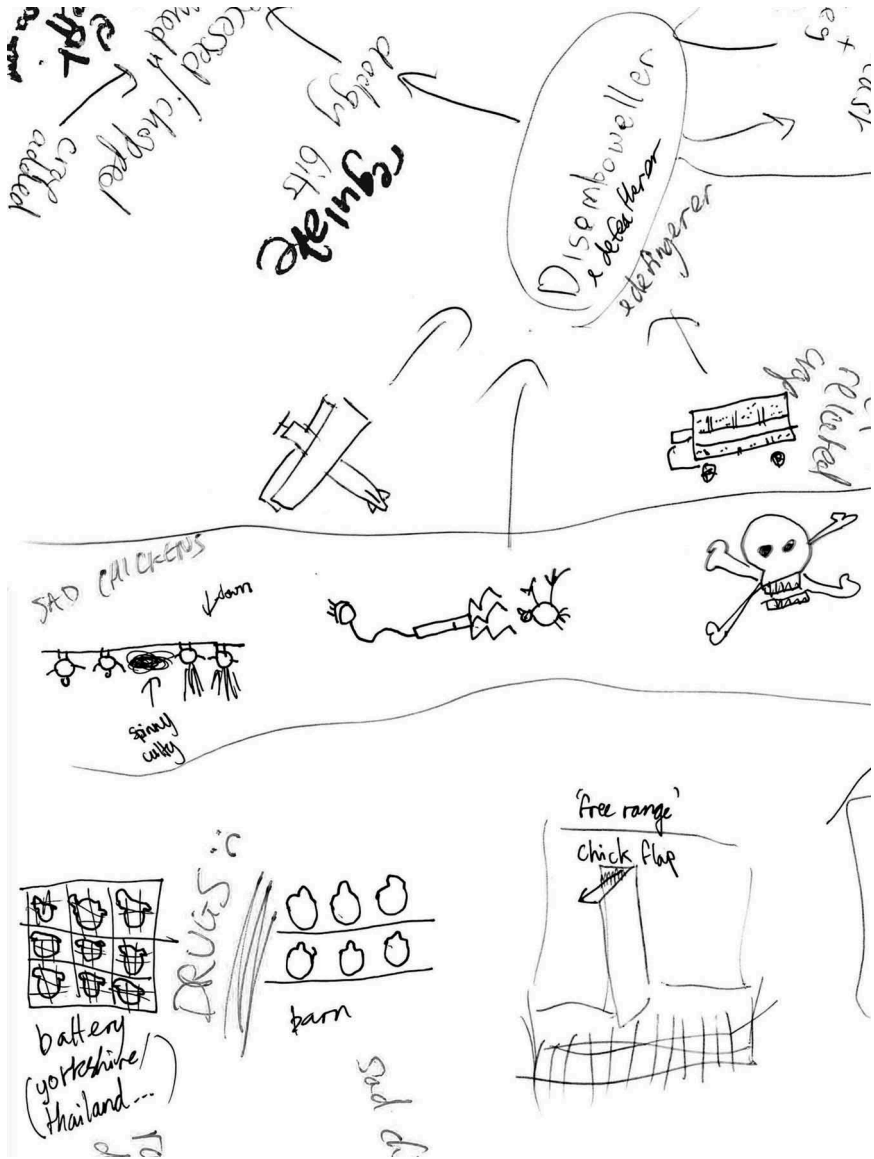


Figure 18.2 Detail of freehand food chain drawing.

we hoped that this would help address some of the problems we had encountered with freehand drawing. By providing the activity with some structure, we hoped to overcome participants' reluctance to draw, and to make the resulting data on their mental models of food chain risk a little clearer and more easily comparable.

*Risk and participatory research*

In order to ensure that this framework remained participant-generated, the freehand drawings from the pilot study were used to generate a list of food chain elements (Table 18.1), which in turn were converted into a series of ‘clipart’-style images (mostly publicly licensed images obtained from the Internet, with a few researcher-generated images in the same style).<sup>8</sup> The revised interview procedure went as follows. Small groups of peers (2–6 members) were presented with a piece of A3 paper on a drawing board, with the food chain elements arranged around the edge in the form of labelled, printed pictures on small pieces of paper mounted on Blu-Tack. Several ‘blank’ images were also available so that groups had the option to create new elements if they wished. Each participant was given black, red and green pens. As with the earlier freehand pilot, the group was asked to work together to create an image of the food chain (either apples or chicken), using the provided ‘element’ pictures and the black pens. Once they agreed that this was complete, they were asked to use the red pens to write down the risks they thought were involved in their food chain, locating them in the image. Once this exercise was complete, they were asked to use the green pens to identify possible risk management actions that could and should be taken to mitigate the risks they had already identified. As a closing question, participants were asked about sources of information about food risk (Where did you find out/hear about these things? Where would you go to find out more?).

*Table 18.1* List of participant-generated food chain elements

<i>Food chain element</i>		
<i>General</i>	<i>Apple food chain-specific</i>	<i>Chicken food chain-specific</i>
Farm	Apple	Slaughter
Garden/allotment	Drink	Chicken (live)
Factory	Apple tree	Chicken (meat)
Warehouse		
Lorry		
Car		
Ship		
Plane		
Farm machinery		
Kitchen preparation		
Kitchen storage		
Processed product		
Plate		
Supermarket		
Small shop		
Catering/restaurant		
Market		
Wholesale		
Blank		





### Risk and participatory research

As in the pilot study, it was made clear to participants that we were interested in ‘what *you think* happens’, rather than what participants might know for sure. Discussions amongst the group while they worked on this were recorded and transcribed, and these transcripts were analysed alongside the images produced during the interview session. An example of the type of image produced in this second version of the task is reproduced in Figure 18.3 (detailed in Figure 18.4). Thus the resulting images provide an effective way of capturing how particular stakeholder groups conceptualise the food chain, the associated risks and how these risks may be mitigated. As such they not only embody some of the defining features of mental models, e.g. the principle of iconicity stating that a mental model has a structure that corresponds to the known structure of what it represents (Johnson-Laird and Byrne, 1991), but also fulfil the needs of the MMA by providing a method for capturing and comparing the mental models of experts, the public and other key stakeholders.

### Interpretation and analysis

Since the method had been designed primarily to facilitate group discussions of food chain risks, it was paramount that transcripts of the group interview sessions

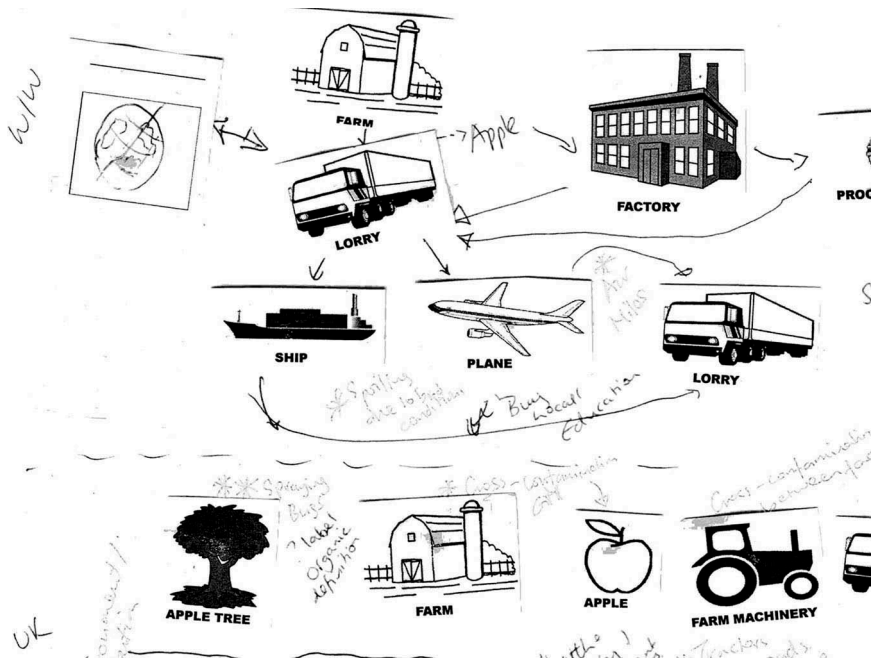


Figure 18.4 Detail of ‘fuzzy-felt’-style food chain image.

were analysed directly alongside the images produced by the groups. The analysis comprised a two-stage process, each asking different questions of the data, which we will describe as the 'descriptive' and 'interpretive' stages of data analysis. The initial 'descriptive' analysis was designed to answer some of our more basic research questions, i.e. what, where and how our stakeholder groups defined risk, and risk management in the food chain. To do this, we carried out a simple content analysis on transcripts and images alike, coding for relatively straightforward features (what risks, what mitigations, where in the food chain?). As an adjunct to this content analysis, the images were also coded for various structural features of the food chains that had been produced (e.g. the ratio of 'risks' to 'mitigations', the number and type of icons, the number of linkages between icons) and the overall 'shape' (e.g. the number of routes and branches).

However, we felt that such an analysis on its own could not hope to fully answer our research questions, as it could not access more complex issues surrounding the meaning of the kinds of risks identified; how the groups negotiated definitions of what constitutes 'food risk'; their broader attitudes to different modes of food production, to risk management and responsibility; what they considered to be 'good/bad' food; and their relationships and attitudes to the other stakeholders in food production. Therefore, a more conventional, in-depth, qualitative 'interpretive' analysis of the interview transcripts was carried out, addressing the above questions as well as drawing out the major themes of discussion in the interview groups. This second stage of analysis focused more upon the textual rather than visual data, although coding was carried out in close reference to the visual images. In part this was due to the limitations of the qualitative data analysis software in use (NVivo), but also because we felt that the 'standardised' nature of the images (i.e. the use of clipart) meant the visual data was not sufficiently 'rich' (i.e. complex and open to the same level of interpretation as the transcripts) to warrant qualitative analysis at this depth.

Presentation and interpretation of our findings lie outside the scope of this chapter (see Barker et al., 2010, for a full description of these). However, the analyses showed that all stakeholder groups were aware of a broad range of processes and procedures that take place between the farm and the point of consumption. Groups conceptualised the food chain, and the risk issues involved, in strikingly different ways. For example, environment/food campaigners and members of the public tended to divide food production into two food chains, mainstream and 'alternative' (organic, fair trade, locally sourced) production, associated with very different levels of risk. In contrast, scientists, farmers and food industry representatives tended to see food production as a unified system, incorporating all modes of production.

Also, participants had very different understandings of what constituted 'risk' in the food chain. For scientists and risk managers, food risks were defined exclusively as factors that cause harm when ingesting a foodstuff. However, other stakeholders included broader risk issues relevant to their own interests and values, such as economic risks (farmers and food industry representatives) or environmental issues (NGO campaigners). Finally, we found that food industry 'insiders' (scientists, risk

managers, food industry representatives and farmers) understood food risks in the context of risk mitigation systems (good management, regulation, inspection and assurance schemes), while other stakeholders showed little awareness of such systems.

## **Discussion**

Running small group interviews structured around a ‘fuzzy-felt’-style activity proved to be significantly more productive and useful, not only in terms of our research objectives, but also, it seemed, for the experiences of the research participants themselves. While we found that participants were often initially puzzled or wary of the task they were asked to undertake, the majority quickly warmed to it as they became engaged in the activity. At times, it was palpable that participants were actively enjoying the chance to ‘play’ in a situation they had obviously expected to be quite formal.

*M1:* also it could go to wholesale as well down here, with a lorry ... well it doesn't matter actually, and that can go then to the small shop, wholesale to small shop and catering ... and this can also go to supermarket and catering up here to really. Sorry, I've taken over here, I love this! *[laughter]*

*M2:* I'll see if I can get you an Etch-A-Sketch!

*(Food industry association, 16/10/06)*

Other participants directly commented on how the activity was helping them to think about, and focus on, food risks in new and different ways – interestingly, this occurred in groups with both low and high levels of familiarity with the issues at stake.

*F2:* I think for these sort of sources, these risks, that would be from a number of outbreaks, and you can see what causes them. But actually to put the whole chain together is quite difficult, 'cause often you only ever see little bits of it. It's only because you've got experience of lots of different areas that you actually see the whole thing, you know, if you see someone at this end, they just say, well we buy birds from a wholesalers, this is what we do with them.

*M1:* that's right, yes. What we are also doing, is surmising that there is actually a linkage, a continuum between over there and all the way down through going into somebody's mouth over there.

*(Food scientists, 01/03/06)*

We speculate that this effect shows how producing an image can facilitate participants' thinking about the issue at hand, helping them to explore their ideas in much greater depth than they may have ever done beforehand. It may also be possible that, particularly with the kind of highly complex system we were asking people to think about, the image acted as a memory aid, providing a record and summary of the groups' thoughts that they could continue to refer back to

throughout the interview. It is probable that this is why we found that facilitator intervention could be kept to a minimum.

However, several problems with the method did arise at different stages of the research process. While the majority of participants interacted positively with the 'fuzzy-felt' task, there was still a significant minority who did not – either by refusing to fully engage in the drawing activity, or by making it clear that they did not consider it to be 'serious' or authoritative enough to constitute legitimate research. The problems around reluctance to engage in the creative activity of freehand drawing were therefore obviously mitigated, but certainly not eliminated, by the use of the 'fuzzy-felt' exercise. Furthermore, we found that sometimes a single person would be nominated 'scribe', either via seniority or willingness to draw, and other group members would only contribute verbally – this may bias the findings towards one individual's viewpoint. As with the earlier drawing stage, we could not see any obvious pattern in how particular groups or individuals interacted with the methodology, an issue which warrants further investigation. We also found the textual data arising from group discussions to be somewhat 'patchy', whereby long periods of very instrumental conversation about creating the image (e.g. 'Let's put this here', 'OK', 'But how does this connect to that?') were interspersed with patches of richer material in which issues such as risk definition were discussed. While this was not necessarily a problem (we did find answers to our research questions), it meant that sections of some of the interview transcripts were not coded. As alluded to above, the imposition of structure upon the research process by using the 'fuzzy-felt' method also led to some (probably inevitable) loss of richness in the visual data. Furthermore, although we attempted to use 'neutral'-looking images in the procedure and to label them as such, these choices would not have been impartial, especially in the case of images we had to produce ourselves.<sup>9</sup> For our study, we considered the trade-off between richness and reliability of data to be worthwhile; however it may not be so for other research. Certainly further work involving freehand drawing of food risks is likely to prove to be a highly productive avenue of enquiry.

Finally, as indicated in the previous section, we encountered some problems while developing a reliable and valid strategy for analysis of the resulting verbal and visual data. We are satisfied that the analytical approach finally adopted was sufficiently robust, but we did find it to be very demanding of researcher time and resources, and speculate as to whether this is a general issue with the analysis of visual data, or visual data in combination with texts/transcripts. Although the method worked well to minimise researcher influence in the interview situation, this of course did not carry through to data analysis, which was as subject to researcher bias as any piece of qualitative research, and was combated in the usual ways, e.g. through inter-coder checking. A potential extension to the methodology which could increase its validity might involve a further research stage in which participant groups reconvene, and the completed and analysed 'fuzzy-felt' images are discussed, giving participants the opportunity to offer their own interpretations of the model. In a participatory context, a joint session involving representatives from several different groups, in which the completed images from those groups

are discussed, might prove to be a highly fruitful approach to fostering dialogue and mutual understanding between them.

Overall, the ‘fuzzy-felt’ method has considerable potential to be developed into a powerful and flexible research tool for use in group interviewing. As seen in our work on food chain risks, it provides participants with a support structure around which they can explore their thoughts in depth about the issue at hand, whilst simultaneously reducing researcher influence upon the interview process. This combination of features means that the method is particularly useful in research situations where a complex system or issue is under discussion; when comparing participants who have differing levels of familiarity or ease with the topic at hand; and when researcher framings of the interview are to be avoided.

The method can also be of potential use in contexts beyond the relatively restricted one of social research methodology. For example, colleagues in the RELU-Risk project have developed a computerised version of the ‘fuzzy-felt’ method, designed for use as a communication tool for exploring food chain risk issues (Zhang, 2007; Barker et al., 2010).

‘Fuzzy-felt’ may also have other applications where its potential as a facilitation aid, rather than data-gathering tool, could be exploited, for example in classroom discussions and public participation events. A potential model for this might be provided by the Democs card games, which use a series of cards with themed images to stimulate discussion in classrooms and small-group participatory exercises (Duensing *et al.*, 2006; Bandelli & Konijn, 2011).<sup>10</sup>

We have carried out the initial development and testing of this unusual new visual method in the context of some very specific research challenges. Although the method has worked well for this particular project, at present not enough is known about how and why it has helped our participants discuss food chain risks. What is needed next is further research to investigate in detail how the ‘fuzzy-felt’ method works (and when it doesn’t, why); how it might be useful for research in domains beyond that of food, knowledge and risk; and to further explore its potential for application in other areas beyond research, such as risk/science communication practice, education and public participation.

## Notes

- 1 Researchers in public engagement with science generally use the term ‘publics’ rather than ‘the public’ to avoid reducing the complex and variable relationships different groups of people have with science to a unitary whole.
- 2 We would define a ‘stakeholder’ as anyone with a specific relationship to food risks, from a professional risk manager, up to and including anyone who buys and eats food.
- 3 ‘Interested publics’ are groups likely to have a particular investment in an issue – for example, in our case this included members of parent–toddler groups (see Miller, 1986).
- 4 The project, known as RELU-Risk (see <https://www.surrey.ac.uk/food-consumer-behaviour-and-health-research-centre/completed-projects/managing-food-chain-risks>), was supported by the UK Research Councils’ Rural Economy and Land Use (RELU) research programme (RES-224-25-0090).
- 5 As described above, we are employing the mental models concept in tandem with social representations theory: we use the term ‘mental models’ in this piece as shorthand for the

- combined mental and social representations we have been trying to access in our research.
- 6 Food risk issues are 'sensitive' not only in personal terms, but can often be commercially and politically sensitive, particularly to campaigning, policy and industry stakeholders.
  - 7 See <https://www.johnadams.co.uk/brands/fuzzy-felt/> for further details of the game.
  - 8 Dillon (2006) has argued that such 'clipart' images have strong continuities with earlier styles of illustration, and may provide a rich seam for researching social representations in and of themselves. As such, our use of this form of image may have facilitated the process of eliciting further mental/social representations.
  - 9 For example, the icon for 'slaughter' created was a neutral box with a live chicken going in one side and a chicken carcass coming out the other. This was commented upon several times as being quite funny, but highlights the sanitised nature of the choice – outcomes could have been quite different if a more 'realistic' or 'emotive' image had been used.
  - 10 See also the Democs website: [www.neweconomics.org/gen/democs.aspx](http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/democs.aspx)

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# 19

## PICTURING THE FIELD

### Social action research, psychoanalytic theory, and documentary filmmaking

*Janice Haaken*

While videotaping in West Africa many years ago for a research project on women and war, a colleague who was assisting with translations told me a story. ‘There was this tourist who was taking photos of a baobab tree,’ she began, explaining how this dramatic tree with its distinctive sculptural form was a standard backdrop in pictures of West Africa. ‘This tourist is taking snapshots of the tree and a young local guy approaches her. “Mama [the term of address for older women], you have deeply offended me and my ancestors”, he says. “My uncle who died long ago has returned as a lizard living in that tree. Now that you have taken the pictures, he must find another tree to settle his spirit.”’ My friend went on with her funny story, widening her eyes in mocking imitation of the horrified tourist. ‘So this clever young guy offers to find a witch doctor to undo this unfortunate disturbance of his uncle’s spirit and the tourist gratefully offers to pay the price. She rushes away with her camera, and the young guy rushes off to tell his friends about the silly tourist.’

I began a series of field projects in West Africa much like the anxious tourist, eager to settle my debts as they arose and to avoid colonial habits of exchange. But I found that the ledgers of history extended far beyond the horizons of my project, and that pictures circulate within African social spaces in ways that do not map readily on to colonial and capitalist systems of exchange. Although we learned to negotiate and explain what we were doing and why, sometimes paying people small sums for letting us take their pictures, the debts implicit in our very presence exceeded any available economic register. Yet once women in the refugee camps, the site of much of our videotaping, learned that our aim was to educate students in North America about their views on the Sierra Leonean civil war and the peace process, their responses were consistently welcoming. There was ‘use value’ in our educational project that went beyond any meager exchange value it might hold for Western markets. As video ethnographers, we were bearing witness to their experiences as women in ways that notes and tape recorders could never achieve. From survivors in refugee camps, traditional healers, to counselors working with

child combatants, Sierra Leonean women gathered in beautiful African garb to give expression to collective memories of the civil war through dance, music, and talk. Extending beyond the individual speaker, the wide angle of the lens captured the collective voice and physical presence of the many women gathered.

But what does the camera promise in such contexts and what illusions does it produce? I initially thought of the camera as merely a research tool. My primary concern was to equip myself with tools suitable for the terrain and the data sought. Videotaping captured non-verbal communication in ways that other technologies would not permit, and it allowed for a wider range of options in the analysis and interpretation of field data. As the use of the camera extended beyond the aim of identifying themes, however, it became apparent that working with visual images required specific methodological and theoretical attentiveness, including attentiveness to the projective aspects of field data. For example, many of the students who initially responded to the footage commented that the women 'did not look like refugees'. The creative use of fabric was evident in the lovely garments the women wore, even in the stark environs of the refugee camps. Many of my students' conceptions of refugees were based on images that circulate in Hollywood films – an area that emerged as a focus of critical discussion. For Sierra Leonean activists who saw this same footage, the pictures registered the capacities of these women to hold on to a sense of self, to wrap themselves in the scattered fragments of their culture, even as they were displaced by civil war – a line of analysis that was incorporated into the documentary.

Rich visual material such as this footage may be seductively misleading, however, even as it opens a wider lens on to field data. While the documentary form retains a greater fidelity to the phenomena under study than do the transformations through traditional forms of data analysis, this very capacity of the medium fosters the illusion of a direct correspondence between the object and its representation. As Dai Vaughan (1999) puts it, 'The documentary – implicitly – makes two claims: on the one hand, to present us with images referring unashamedly to their sources; on the other, to articulate a statement of which those sources will be the object' (p. 30). The transformations involved – indeed, the inevitable gap between image and statement – typically are concealed.

A key aim of the chapter is to show how documentary film and video production – with their reliance on visual images – bring into bold relief many of the ethical quandaries of field research more generally. Any research question of social significance carries emotional and social investments and potential ethical conflicts over the representation of findings. Tensions inevitably arise over how to take into account the point of view of the researcher/observer in pictures produced of some aspect of social reality (see Mirzoeff 1999; G. Rose 2007). In the documentary format, tensions emerge over the power of directors/producers to engage in a kind of double projection, on the one hand, in both projecting their own subjectivity on to the external world and transferring this projected world back on to the screen, and to create a fuller record than other media permit of social truths on the other (see Nichols 1991). Indeed, tension between the 'subjective' and the 'objective' demands of the documentary format remains at the

center of debate in the field (Vaughan 1999). The politics of representation – often concealed in the abstract language of academic writing – are exposed in the documentary. The accessibility and evocative power of visual media invite broader critical engagement in what is shown and what is omitted and demands on the filmmaker to justify such choices. On the other hand, to the extent that a picture ‘tells a thousand words’, it operates as a seductive screen in seeming to obviate the necessity of interpretive concepts. Indeed, as documentaries have moved beyond educational films and reached new aesthetic heights, audiences bring many of the conventions of highly produced fiction films to their viewing experiences (Rothman 2009).

A second aim of the chapter is to introduce principles from psychoanalytic theory and social action research methods that inform the Sierra Leonean documentary projects. Although there is a rich history of psychoanalytic film theory, including feminist psychoanalytic film theory (see, for example, Mulvey 1988; Kaplan 1990; Doane 1991; hooks 1994), the documentary film has been relatively under-theorized despite a growing consensus that the line between fictional and non-fictional films can be murky (Nichols 1991; Rothman 2009). Similarly, the traditions of social action and participatory action research, while sometimes drawing on visual data, have not carried the critique of positivist science into the arena of working with visual images. Yet psychoanalytic film criticism and the social action research tradition carry important insights for documentary film, specifically in working through dilemmas in the use of moving images (G. Rose 2007).

The chapter enlists these dual theoretical lenses in discussing visual methods in the *Moving to the Beat* (M2B) project – the second of two documentaries carried out in collaboration with Sierra Leonean peace activists. After providing a brief history of this project, I deploy a framework routinely introduced in my teams to identify areas of critical reflection. The framework encompasses three sequential and dynamically recurring sites of concern – sites where questions arise over the *premises* behind the project, the *processes* through which it is carried out, and the *products* created through the labor deployed.

## **The project**

M2B grew out of an ongoing collaboration with Sierra Leonean peace activists in West Africa and the United States and came to include 125 university students in the USA and 75–80 youth in Freetown, Sierra Leone engaged in various activities over a 4-year period. The M2B project included the production and distribution of the documentary (a version for television broadcasting and a DVD with special features), a series of music videos, an interactive website and curriculum guide, and a hip-hop activist organization. Although the production of the documentary film was the primary project of the M2B team, students and activists were engaged in the other activities of the project as well. Routine meetings with screenings of work samples and phone conference calls were held, and students assisted in writing grants and organizing conferences. In addition to high school and university M2B conferences, students attended film festivals where M2B was screened (see [www.moving2thebeat.com](http://www.moving2thebeat.com)).

The M2B project began with the videotaping in Sierra Leonean refugee camps in 1999 that resulted in the production of the documentary *Diamonds, Guns and Rice*, distributed with a curriculum book, *Speaking Out: Women, War, and the Global Economy* (Haaken *et al.* 2005). In the course of filming special features for inclusion in the *Diamonds, Guns and Rice* DVD in 2005, we learned that the next generation of Sierra Leonean youth in Freetown and in Black communities in the USA were enlisting hip-hop to speak out on issues, from post-war trauma and the AIDS/HIV pandemic to poverty and political rights. The M2B documentary was initiated as a means of both documenting this use of hip-hop among youth on both sides of the Atlantic, and providing a forum for young men and women to speak in their own voices about why they were using hip-hop as a language for social change. The visually performative aspects of hip-hop – embodied in expressive forms such as break dancing, gestures, and characteristic modes of dress – were central to the concept of language deployed in the documentary.

From the early project focused on women to the later project centered on youth, we sought to understand the role of music, dance, and storytelling in post-conflict healing and reparation. Since many of the women I interviewed in refugee camps along the border of Sierra Leone communicated through song and movement, as well as through verbal language, my interest was in using the camera to capture in a fuller way their experiences. This interest extended into deeper forms of collaboration as the focus on producing a documentary required gathering materials from immigrants and refugees living in the United States, United Kingdom, and West Africa. Sierra Leoneans contributed a rich range of materials, from documents, photos, and archival footage – much of which was used in the production of *Diamonds, Guns and Rice*. This process of collecting images of the country and culture prior to the war, as well as images of the war itself, became a form of grief work for many of the participants (see Haaken 2001; Haaken *et al.* 2005). In recovering sustaining images of the cultural past as well as images of the ravaging impact of the war, the documentary project drew on the psychoanalytic assumption that recovering from trauma requires capacities to recover the ‘good objects’ of the relational past as well as the ‘bad objects’ (see Haaken 1998, 2010). Editing of both documentaries involved alternating between disturbing and consoling imagery as a means of sustaining a connection with viewers – a line of analysis pursued later in this chapter.

This background of quite extensive involvement in the Sierra Leonean communities, both in West Africa and in the USA, provided the impetus for the M2B project, continuing the initial focus on embodied forms of protest. Whereas *Diamonds, Guns and Rice* showed how women were using traditional cultural practices to resist patriarchal forms of power, M2B grew out of an insistence on the part of youth that they were breaking from traditional music and dance and identifying with global youth culture. For Sierra Leonean elders and many of us on the project team, the question of whether youth were engaging hip-hop in a socially progressive or regressive way motivated continuation of our collaborative inquiry.

The visual aspects of hip-hop storytelling confronted us with the constraints of many of our discursive methods of analyzing field data. M2B enlists the narrative device of the journey – in this case, the journey of a hip-hop group from Portland, Oregon, who traveled to Sierra Leone to bring the radical roots of hip-hop to the Motherland. The story tells a broader collective tale of Black youth searching for an identity that encompasses the trauma, ideals, hopes, and losses born of their common and differing histories. But for our participants, the story emerged in the form of visual pictures and fantasy images as readily as it did in linguistic forms. For example, many Sierra Leonean youth described their fantasies of America as a ‘second heaven’ – as a place of sensual gratification and commodified displays of wealth – even as they recognized the illusory aspects of this same fantasy. Their bitter conflicts over the diamond trade, a conflict at the center of the Sierra Leonean civil war, brought home the recognition that the ‘bling-bling’ of American hip-hop culture was a mirage.

Instead of identifying with the dazzling icons of mainstream hip-hop culture, Sierra Leonean artists, much like youth elsewhere in the world, tended to identify with Tupac Shakur. Tupac was often described as a mentor to hip-hop activists in both Freetown and Portland, idealized in part because his lyrics and movements resonated so potently with the collective pain of the Black struggle (see T. Rose 1994, 2008; Chang 2005). Posters of Tupac were often on display in hip-hop social spaces in Freetown, and the social basis of this identification of many youth with Tupac emerged as a theme in the documentary. The image of this beautiful man, often with his upper body exposed, circulates in some contexts as an object of the white gaze – exploited much as are fetishized female objects of the male gaze (see, for example, hooks 1992). But images of Tupac were deployed in M2B through the interpretive gaze of Black youth who identified with this defiant figure, with his characteristic proud pose, bare chest, chains, and loose ‘prison pants,’ markers of a shared history of violent oppression and political resistance (T. Rose 2008).

Just as the M2B documentary traces a journey where Black youth struggle to find common ground, the process of making the documentary involved entering this same rocky terrain. With crews working in two cities and production members reaching across race, age, gender, and class divisions, as well as differences in immigration status, the project itself needed to find its unifying beat. The lead team in Portland included Caleb Heymann, a young Euro-American man (also my son), who was director of photography, co-director, and editor; Abdul Fofanah, a young Sierra Leonean American man who was co-director and narrator; P. C. Peri, a middle-aged African-American man who was a cinematographer and co-producer; and myself, a middle-aged Euro-American woman who was producer. In addition to this lead crew, the three Rebel Souz, three African-American young men, participated in the M2B group meetings, as well as contributing to conferences and fundraising events. The team in Freetown, all of whom were young Black Africans, included Sam Dixon, assistant director, and 25 production assistants and artists who worked on the project over a period of 4 years.

## Premises

Field projects involve the organization of human labor much like other forms of productive human activity. The labor process includes the forces of production – the technologies, resources, and tools deployed in the purposeful transformation of nature – and the relations of production – the social organization of human activity in carrying it out. This attentiveness to the material conditions of field projects constituted an organizing frame and site of critical reflection at various stages of the documentary, beginning with the premises that guided its development (see Burman 2004; Whitehead and McNiff 2006). The premises behind a project include the personal histories and assumptions that participants bring to the activity, as well as the theoretical and methodological frameworks invoked in striving for a common language. The M2B team took up readings ranging from literature on hip-hop (e.g., T. Rose 1994, 2008; Clay 2003; Chang 2005), to video ethnographic and documentary theory (e.g., Nichols 1991; Haaken 2005), to social action research (e.g., Argyris *et al.* 1985; Lykes 1989; Fine and Torres 2006), psychoanalytic-feminist film theory (e.g., Mulvey 1988; Doane 1991), and cultural theory (e.g., hooks 1992; Foucault 1995; Hall *et al.* 1996; Hall 1997; Fanon 2004).

As a social justice activist as well as an academic, my interests in film criticism and film production are grounded in understanding cultural forces that shape everyday forms of consciousness and processes of social change (see Haaken 2001, 2005). In moving from teaching courses on the psychology of film to actually producing films, my aim was to create products of social knowledge that are both educational and entertaining, both intellectually demanding and aesthetically satisfying (also, see [www.queensofheartdoc.com](http://www.queensofheartdoc.com); [www.guiltyexcept.com](http://www.guiltyexcept.com)). The recent availability of high-end consumer cameras and editing equipment opened the field for projects such as M2B – projects that would have been far more difficult to carry out just a decade prior.

In beginning the collaboration with an explicit feminist focus, specifically centered on bringing the perspectives of women into discussions of war and the peace process, the decision to turn to hip-hop seemed at first glance to be counter to feminist principles. Students and participants at conferences where work samples were presented routinely condemned hip-hop for its sexism and challenged us on this point. As a research and production team guided by activist commitments, our aim was to bring gender into the analysis of the dynamics of hip-hop and to understand how women were positioning themselves in relation to this form. We also drew on feminist frameworks that stressed the historically dynamic and multilayered dimensions of gender identity (see Segal 1990; Crenshaw 1994; Layton 1998; Collins 2000). As women were entering the field of hip-hop performance, we were interested in understanding how they were taking up the aggressive style of this cultural language, as well as the multiple expressions of masculinities produced through hip-hop. Before each of the three trips to Freetown for intensive shooting, the production team discussed ways of engaging women artists and activists and bringing their experiences into view.

Our aim throughout this project was to use the power of visual media to capture the gripping dramas of oppressed and marginalized people caught in

historical and social forces not of their own making. Images of Africa brought to American audiences tend to alternate between brutally violent, tragic, and exotic. Narratives often follow a formulaic Western storyline that centers on either a talented individual (or few individuals) who survive and escape their miserable lot, or portray a hopeless state of senseless violence and misery. The M2B team sought to bring a more complex reading of African politics and culture into view, and to work through a series of dilemmas in the use of visual media – an area where the accessibility of the medium may readily conceal its problematic cultural cargo. Although fiction films carry these same potentials, with the documentary, ‘the image is perceived as signifying what it appears to record’ (Vaughan 1999: 58). The cultural codes embedded in the construction of the signifying system of the documentary film are often eclipsed by the evocative power of the image itself.

In calling for researchers to leave their laboratories and enter the field of real social problems, Kurt Lewin (1975, c1951), the founder of social action research in psychology, quipped that ‘there is nothing so practical as a good theory’ (p. 169). His program of research was oriented toward practical problems but action research also depended on good theory – ways of seeing and understanding how things may fit together within some explanatory framework. Indeed, without a theoretical frame, interpretations of data are inevitably structured by conventions in the culture that work their way into the program of inquiry. M2B drew on this same ethos in exploring how hip-hop was enlisted by youth as a language for protest and social change. A key premise behind social action research – one that similarly informs psychoanalytic approaches to fieldwork – centers on the idea that researchers are deeply embedded in the phenomena of interest (Argyris *et al.* 1985; Fine and Torres 2006; Fine 2006).

Although psychoanalytic and social action researchers mutually emphasize the subjective side of science, psychoanalytic researchers emphasize the role of unconscious anxieties and defenses not readily accessible through methods of self-reflection, for example, through field notes, journaling, and analyses of power relations that structure the research process. Psychoanalytic researchers make use of techniques such as free association, where space is allowed for exploring past experiences that come to mind in relation to the project (see Burman 2004; Hollway 2004). In the research context, this means reflecting on personal and collective forms of transference – for example, how intense feelings that may seem inappropriate or infantile, whether anger, fear, competitiveness, or forms of desire, are part of human experience but may be heightened when crossing cultural borders (Obeyesekere 1990; Molino 2004; Haaken 2010).

An example from the M2B project team illustrates this dynamic tension. One of the students – a white woman – was perpetually unable to carry out her assignments. We met repeatedly to review instructions and to clarify the nature of her tasks but to no avail. A very bright and capable student, she nonetheless seemed to forget what she was supposed to do and was unable to even understand her notes after our review sessions. She was doing well elsewhere in her studies and was confused that a project team she had sought to join would also be the site of her most defeating moments as a student. One principle we had discussed in the



research team concerned this tendency to bring hopes and ideals to field projects that make them intense sites of anxiety and disappointment. The idea of working on a research team that was also making a movie seemed particularly seductive. Yet much like other research teams, the work of this team included tedious tasks, from transcribing, shotlogging, and coding footage to taking field notes and carrying out library research.

For my distressed stuck student, the dilemma seemed to center on what was happening in the field. So we began to talk about her experiences as a production assistant on shoots at the clubs and houses where we were videotaping hip-hop artists and activists. As we talked about her experiences, she recalled how upsetting it had been when some of the young Black men at the clubs snubbed her. She felt that they were prejudiced toward her because she was white, noticing that they were quite friendly toward the Black members of our team. Although they were not physically threatening, these young men had a hostile edge that made her uncomfortable. As we talked about her reactions, we returned to the concept of transference that we had taken up in our research seminar (Wachtel 1993). For my student, understanding that she evoked a history of associations for these young men, just as they did for her, allowed a vital degree of emotional distance.

Carrying out research across cultural borders, and particularly across borders forged through a history of racist violence and trauma, requires some capacity to weather the intense affects that emerge. Just as psychoanalysis teaches that the therapeutic encounter revisits ancient conflicts in the form of the transference, so, too, does the documentary encounter.

Presenting findings in the format of documentary films, with their evocative power and potential to invite projection and identifications with the images produced, tends to heighten such effects (Nichols 1991; G. Rose 2007). Indeed, presentation of footage at academic conferences inevitably stirs more intense audience responses than those expressed at conventional academic conferences. As a form of socially produced *memory*, the moving image evokes a distinctive splitting in consciousness: the subject is both palpably alive and registered as a ghostly absence. Because of the direct exposure and vulnerability of subjects on the screen, audiences express, perhaps unconsciously, distress and hostility if they perceive that the filmmaker has not ethically justified his/her use of these images.

Drawing on feminist-psychoanalytic film theory, we attempted to unpack the concept of the camera as a 'phallic' form of power (see Mulvey 1989; Doane 1991). Through this critical theoretical lens, the phallus is conceptualized as a defensive structure, organized around infantile fantasies of omnipotence and narcissistic control. Psychoanalytic theory brings to theorizing the visual an emphasis on pleasure in looking, *scopophilia*, as constitutive of subjectivity. This pleasure also carries infantile anxieties projected on to the world, whether in the form of powers associated with the gaze, or looking, just as there are anxieties and defenses associated with looking away (J. Rose 1986). This displacement of vision and turning away from the frightening object were central to Freud's concept of the masculine fetish, a concept taken up by feminist film theorists in working with the politics of spectatorship (see G. Rose 2007). Feminist theorists draw on

psychoanalysis in emphasizing the anxious, conflicted, and ambivalent currents in masculine identity in patriarchal societies (Penley 1988; Ehrens 1990). The feminine object – as a fantasy or an object in the visual field – serves as repository for disavowed or repressed masculine anxieties. This focus on the dynamic instability of such psychological processes opens the ground for cultural interpretations oriented toward social change. Women, as well as men, may deploy the gaze in exploitative ways, even as women may also suffer excessive inhibitions in relation to the aggressive aspects of looking.

Political premises included discussion of how feminist portrayals of gendered violence may inadvertently perpetuate racist stereotypes (see hooks 1992). In *Diamonds, Guns and Rice*, debate had centered on how to incorporate graphically violent images into the documentary. The most readily available photos and video footage available to us supported the view that young Black men were largely responsible for the carnage. Many of the Sierra Leonean women sought to place at the center of the documentary gruesome images of mutilated bodies with young men – part of the Revolutionary United Front and various militia groups – fleeing triumphantly. In taking up this difficult issue of which images to include, we spent considerable time talking about what the images meant to the various participants in our group. Many Sierra Leonean activists in the group pressed to include these graphic images to break through the Western wall of denial and indifference. But I had grown increasingly wary of shocking images of third-world trauma as they captivated Western audiences, arousing as they often do fleeting feelings of self-righteous moral outrage. I voiced my concern that images of violence circulate all too readily in Western culture and that they often stir voyeuristic fascination, or feelings of despair and depressive withdrawal from political situations portrayed as hopeless. For if everything has been destroyed and victims rendered utterly impotent, why care enough to understand the situation more deeply? Our aim was to show that, in spite of the civil war, people are still living and connecting with one another, and they hold insights into political and existential concerns beyond the borders of their own crisis. Nonetheless, I wondered if my investment in downplaying visceral displays of violence was overdetermined by my uneasiness in displaying the horrifying destruction. Even as I may have been defending against my own impulse to withdraw out of a sense of hopelessness and despair, the sustained efforts required in creating a concrete and publicly accessible product provided a vital holding ground between the manic and depressive poles of our project.

From the perspective of psychoanalytic film theory, we are as concerned with the *missing object* and the *repressed object* as we are with those objects dominating our field of vision (J. Rose 1986). Images of racially inflected violence routinely circulate in Western media, often masking less visible actors. Many of the dynamics behind the Sierra Leonean civil war were *out of view*, located, for example, in the sanitized and remote worlds of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the diamond industry. This same dynamic, where broader societal influences may be less readily accessible to empirical observation, remains a pervasive problem in psychological research more generally (Prilleltensky 2003).

This interest in the unconscious of the film – those images referenced that remain out of view – draws on the premise that visual culture develops around the management of human conflict and anxiety. Action films, for example, project phallic images of power, where the helpless maiden serves as the repository for disavowed male feelings of helplessness and vulnerability (Kauffman 1996). In producing a documentary film that centers on Black young men and violence, spectators carry conventions of Hollywood films into their viewing experiences. At the same time, the documentary mode implicitly offers viewers the promise of seeing ‘how it really is’ and ‘what is really going on’. Anxiety over viewing massive destruction is often managed in conventional films – both documentary and fiction films – through enlisting audience identifications with the survivors. The highly acclaimed documentary *Born into Brothels* (Briski and Kaufman 2004) is one such example. Much like the prototypical action film, the resolution of the danger at the center of *Born into Brothels* resolves through the deliverance of exceptional individuals from a situation of collective misery. In addition to reproducing ideas about art as a magical process unrelated to schooling, the documentary invites identification with the talented few who are spirited out of their desolate situation. Images of the mothers of these destitute children – women who work as prostitutes – conform in the film to conventional prototypes of passive victims. While they are not demonized, they are cast as standing helplessly by as the filmmakers engage in the rescue work at the center of the story. The actual political organizing of prostitutes in Calcutta remains outside the frame of the documentary. In M2B, our aim was to work against such conventions and to create a complex representation of collective trauma, reparation, and resistance, with hip-hop as the shared language for global dialogue on issues affecting marginalized youth (see Bloustien 2007; Watts and Flanagan 2007; Rose 2008).

### Processes

Social action and psychoanalytic researchers share an emphasis on the relational side of knowledge production – how findings emerge through working alliances and taking into account the varying subjective registers of any given phenomenon. Psychoanalytic fieldwork extends this notion of socially situated knowledge to how group members may learn to correct for the unconscious blindspots of one another (Burman 2004; Hollway 2004). Many forms of critical self-reflection stir defensiveness in ways that occlude the frame. Indeed, areas where insight is most important can be areas of severe blindspots (Argyris *et al.* 1985). For example, graphic images of battered women – often taken up in feminist campaigns concerning violence against women – stir relatively little debate, often because the images seem to establish so incontestably the moral weight of the critique (see Morrison and Lacour 1997; Haaken 2010).

In its focus on conflict and ambivalence as central to human development, as well as an impetus for growth and social change, psychoanalytic concepts offer critical tools for thinking through group dynamics in field projects (Haaken 2010). These tensions – and the transferences from past experiences on to the present encounter – may be

particularly pronounced in research across cultural boundaries. White researchers in minority or oppressed communities may feel the ghosts of the colonial past inhabiting the encounter – always present in the room as that ‘third term’ of history.

In contrast to field researchers who generate data from surveys and retreat to a laboratory to analyze their findings, the approach adopted in this program of inquiry requires sustained engagement in field settings. Findings that matter to people often emerge slowly over time within a space that allows for some freedom of thought and genuine dialogue. The footage provided this space where representations of experience could be presented and negotiated over time. As we worked through the questions that arose at meetings and screenings of work samples of M2B, interest in understanding social identity took center stage. Rather than simply asserting the importance of hip-hop as an identity and a language, we wanted to understand its dynamics and what it meant to the various participants. Although these are the kinds of questions researchers typically ask, the impetus for M2B came from the participants themselves and their interest in combining interviews, dialogue, lyrics, and hip-hop performance. As one Sierra Leonean artist commented, ‘When we come together to understand something, we do it through music rather than holding a conference.’ This same sentiment motivated the documentary. Or as Isadora Duncan was thought to have said, ‘If I could say it in words, I wouldn’t have to dance to it’ (cited in Nichols 1991: 276).

In the course of this collaboration, many conferences *were* held, however, in bringing academics, peace activists and artists together to discuss the questions to be taken up in the documentary. We also sought to breach the wall between academia and everyday life. Hip-hop emerged as a rich site for this convergence of interests. There is a flourishing scholarly literature on hip-hop as both an artistic genre and social movement (Clay 2003; Chang 2005; T. Rose 2008), but very little of this work makes its way into hip-hop culture.

There are many styles of documentary production with their varying aesthetic, political, and intellectual sensibilities. Much of the discourse in the academic literature centers on four prototypical styles: the *expository*, the *observational*, the *interactive*, and the *reflexive* modes of documentary. Although *Diamonds, Guns and Rice* and M2B included elements of the expository style, with its focus on presenting an analysis of a social problem, and the observational approach, which involves extensive shooting to capture a world in as unobtrusive a way as possible, M2B drew on more theoretically informed discussions of these various approaches. The observational approach characterizes many *vérité*-style films, where there is little or no narrative arc, as well as ethnographic films – an approach developed early on by anthropologists (see Nichols 1991). Ethnographic films follow from intense engagement in a setting and sustained contact with informants – with participants who assist the filmmaker in translating and interpreting the activities or practices documented.

The contemporary movement toward *reflexive* approaches grew out of challenges to the observational style, and particularly its tendency to conceal the motives and interventions of the filmmakers. The reflexive documentary brought the process of producing images to the center of the film project, whether in bringing the

director into the frame itself or through editing techniques. The reflexive tradition strives to expose the concealed operations of the film and to display rather than suture over the production process. The aim here is to disrupt the spectator's fantasy of accessing a world that can be mastered through the medium of the camera (for examples, see Rothman 2009).

In selecting a style for shooting and editing, we discussed these various approaches and their implications for carrying out the aims of the project. One aim was to draw on some of the principles of direct or observational cinema, with their emphasis on allowing the story to 'emerge' from the footage, but we also were convinced by many of the critiques of this approach. Although the principle of 'show don't tell' pervades contemporary documentary film production, particularly in breaking from the didacticism of the 'educational film', facts or images also don't speak for themselves. As Gilberto Perez (2009: 14) points out,

It's a posture, a trope, for an author to hide behind his or her own fiction, to conceal the hand that constructed these characters and incidents, the mind that intended them to have a certain meaning and effect ... It's ironic for the author of a story to pretend that the story says it all and that he or she has nothing to say.

It also has become a conventional trope in reflexive approaches to bring the filmmaker into the frame, as though his/her visible presence is sufficient to expose such effects. Although one of the co-directors served as the narrator and guide in M2B, we also sought to employ editing techniques that broke from the realism of some observational cinema. Our reflexive method centered chiefly on the participatory mode of developing the content. Following in the tradition of Paulo Freire (1972/2004), we sought to understand hip-hop as a form of social identity and a political language from the perspectives of hip-hop artists/activists. Rather than recording their lyrics and analyzing them from a distance, we enlisted the youth in interpreting their own lyrics and identifications with hip-hop. After the shooting in Sierra Leone, the team pursued the same questions with an African and African-American hip-hop community in Portland, Oregon. The Portland group held a deep affinity with the Sierra Leonean hip-hop group, both in their mutual interest in political hip-hop and their identifications with the radical roots of American hip-hop.

## **Products**

Scholars and documentary filmmakers are routinely required to clarify their intended audiences, whether other academics or specific demographic groups, but such queries often presuppose that intellectual rights have been worked out in advance. Similarly, ethical issues are negotiated in advance, for example, through human subject review procedures. Uncertainties attached to the fate of the final product in documentary field projects, however, require an ongoing process of negotiation. In this sense, they never permit the ethical dissociation of scholarly

questions from ongoing commitments to the context of inquiry. After producing a series of work samples, trailers, and writing grants to fund the final editing process, the National Black Programming Consortium, in conjunction with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, funded the M2B documentary to air on national public television in the United States. This time-limited licensing of the documentary leaves open, however, ongoing issues around rights and responsibilities for the products of this shared activity.

Just as hip-hop pushes the boundaries of intellectual property rights, with sampling as one key site of controversy, M2B raised some of these same political and legal issues concerning who owns and controls the project. From the beginning the decision was made to divide any proceeds from sale or distribution between the Portland and the Freetown M2B organizations, with two-thirds of the revenue to the Freetown group. At the same time, ongoing issues required negotiation over DVD distribution and music videos that were produced, as well as how to work with the tension between the activist mission of the project and the individual aspirations of participating artists.

Having identified a series of themes that had emerged from the footage and discussions, informed by phone consultations and exchange of work samples with the group in Freetown, the Portland team proceeded with editing the final version for public television broadcasting. As activist filmmakers, we were interested in themes related to resistance and rebellion, but we also wanted to portray these insurgent elements of youth identity in complex and nuanced ways. Whereas some social science literature approaches hip-hop as a forum where the rebellious or aggressive energies of marginalized youth may be safely 'channeled' (Dimitriadis 2009), we sought to critique this same concept. Although the youth sometimes spoke of 'putting down the gun and taking up the mic', they also talk in the documentary about how politicians and commercial forces often authorize sanitized forms of hip-hop as a means of managing youthful rebelliousness.

Even as African and American artists shared identifications with radical traditions and disdain for commercial hip-hop, they brought differing understandings of what hip-hop identities carried. A key dilemma in editing the final product centered on reconciling aesthetic conventions cultivated in Western cinema, conventions that often build the drama around an individual story, and our commitment to represent a collective experience. The National Black Programming Consortium appreciated this dilemma but also asked that we draw out more of the individual story of Abdul Fofanah. Our methods of developing our character of Fofanah, as the guide and narrator, were through his memories of the war, using cuts to war imagery he had seen on television and fades to images of food markets in the streets of Freetown, to represent his struggle to find the 'good objects' amidst this destructive imagery. Abdul also was often in dialogue with others in groups and positioned as a bridge between worlds, reinforced by the visual alternating between scenes that drew out the beauty of public spaces where poor people gather in both cities.

A central dynamic of psychological recovery from trauma centers on developing capacities to move into and out of disturbing memories and states of mind. Replicating what Tricia Rose (1994) describes as the elements of flow, layering,

and rupture that characterize hip-hop aesthetics, M2B shifts between the ruptures created by the civil war, poverty, corruption, and the AIDS epidemic in West Africa to the layered identity and loose flow of Black global identities at the center of hip-hop culture. The editing style of the documentary includes alternating jump cuts and quick edits with long shots with extended storytelling, and 'reverse time shots' that capture visually the turn-table record scratching effects so prevalent in hip-hop music. Much like rap music itself, the documentary brings a collision of words and images on to the screen.

An additional dilemma in producing the final product centered on how to visually represent key themes, particularly differing conceptions of what it means to identify as a *rebel*. Even as the two groups spoke and rapped about their outrage against the system and their elders, differences emerged in their associations between hip-hop and rebellion. The aggressive elements of hip-hop and its capacity to 'tell it like it is' resonated with youth who described feeling silenced and abandoned by their elders. But associations with the word 'rebel' diverged for the American and Sierra Leoneans. When the Rebel Soulz went to Sierra Leone with our team for the last phase of shooting, the group performed one of their songs, 'Soul Rebel', before an audience of thousands at a stadium in Freetown. As the documentary visually demonstrates, the rowdily enthusiastic audience became notably still during the performance. Co-director and narrator Abdul Fofanah offers commentary on this scene, suggesting that the audience may not have understood most of the lyrics but the term 'rebel' aroused disturbing memories of their own rebel war that concluded a few years prior. After the concert, Rebel Soulz members went to the local radio station to talk about what the term 'rebel' meant to them, rapping as well about their vision of non-violent resistance. The documentary follows Abdul and Rebel Soulz members as they talk with hip-hop artists at the Milton School for the blind and learn how the trauma of the war has shaped their uses of hip-hop. These images of blind hip-hop activists advance the idea that we don't hear much of what inspires the music and movement – that vision is just one of many senses for grasping the world. Further, in bringing into view young people who have been traumatized but also remain quite intact and vibrant, the M2B team sought to work against the fetishizing of a very narrow vision of beauty in Western films.

More than their US counterparts, the Sierra Leonean group carried the trauma of violence into their lyrics. They also were using hip-hop to educate older men in their communities about condom use and sexual practices – a subversive use of hip-hop that challenged traditional intergenerational borders of acceptable discourse. Scenes of youth – young women and men – playfully holding condoms and performing condom education, sometimes in parody of their moralizing elders, may be offered as one example of how a 'picture tells a thousand words'. The pictures are no substitute for analysis but they are places where key dilemmas portrayed in the film register in memory. Students often return to this scene in discussions after the film of sexual politics, sometimes commenting that they thought women in Africa had no sexual rights. While this is an area where Sierra Leonean women have been repressed, sexuality also is an area of struggle and

female resistance. The images fortify the film's challenge to Western habits of counterposing 'liberated' Western women and those who are cast as completely subjugated elsewhere in the world. Set against the vast academic and policy literature on AIDS/HIV, these scenes in M2B are more effective because they carry out an important aim of the documentary: to make sayable the unsayable. They also make visible the invisible by bringing images of marginalized groups into view in ways that disrupt Western fantasy images of these same people and their political dilemmas.

Another idea carried into the final editing was to show how social movements hold contradictory elements, both progressive and regressive. They may claim new space for self-development and simultaneously oppress others (Morrison and Lacour 1997; Haaken 2010). We drew on footage where sites of tension and dialogue emerged between female and male Sierra Leonean artists and visually juxtaposed their moments of recognition and misrecognition. Young audiences, particularly, routinely comment on one of the scenes in the M2B documentary as illustrative of this dynamic. The scene is of Lady Bee, one of the best-regarded hip-hop artists in Sierra Leone, performing on a stage and then leaving the stage after the equipment fails. In the after-performance interview, Lady Bee is asked what happened and why she had not finished her song. She comments that it was just a technical problem. The interviewer continues with a probe, however, posing the question of whether it would have gone differently if she were a man. 'If I were a man', she responds with more authority, 'they would have fixed the problem so I could finish my performance.' The interviewer goes on to ask her to say more about the position of female performers in Sierra Leone. In commenting on this scene, memorable because it is so visually evocative, young audiences often note that the probes by the interviewer opened the space for Lady Bee to interpret her situation resistively. The documentary establishes an alliance with her in holding the ground behind the stage, cinematically granting her a larger stage than the one that she was forced to relinquish.

## **Conclusions**

'Keepin' it real' is a repeated refrain in hip-hop literature (T. Rose 1994, 2008). For researchers and documentarists outside of the hip-hop world, the question of how to 'keep it real' carries a double challenge. Rebel Soulz take this up as a mission to 'bring the real America' to the Motherland and to disrupt African fantasies of the American dream. Progressive researchers and documentary filmmakers bring their own fantasies and defenses to documentary field projects and the realities they portray, even as they may be committed to reflective and non-oppressive practices. And they work against powerfully hypnotic notions of 'the real' already circulating in popular culture (Dimitriadis 2009). Indeed, students at screenings of M2B often comment that these Black youth, with their hip clothes and styles, 'don't look like real Africans'. As they share their associations with 'looking African', stock images from Hollywood films typically emerge as a context for discussion.

Working to portray worlds ruptured by the trauma of history while seeking new forms of recognition inevitably gives rise to forms of misrecognition. And in



advancing the urgency and scope of humanitarian crises in places such as Sierra Leone, field researchers may enlist the immediacy of visual media in ways that inadvertently reproduce Westernized ways of seeing – ways that perpetuate the fantasy that, however bad things are in the West, the specter of life on the margins of the Empire is infinitely worse. Visual media have the capacity to disrupt habitual modes of looking and to reduce social distance. But they also carry unanticipated freight that requires ongoing engagement and capacities to weather conflicts that emerge in producing cultural material while working across cultural borders. Documentary field projects widen the lens for such possibilities and make visible the process of knowledge production and its various blindspots, even as they carry powerful potential for suturing over these same effects.

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# MOVING FROM SOCIAL NETWORKS TO VISUAL METAPHORS WITH THE RELATIONAL MAPPING INTERVIEW

An example in early psychosis<sup>1</sup>

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This chapter describes how to undertake a Relational Mapping Interview (RMI; Boden, Larkin, & Iyer, 2018) and how to analyse the visual data created in this approach. We will illustrate our method with data from an experiential research project that explored the relationships of young people (18–25 years) under the care of Early Intervention Services for Psychosis, which are community outreach services providing biopsychosocial interventions for first-episode psychosis. Everyone in the study had experienced a mental health crisis within the last three years and we were interested to understand what it is like and what it means to be connected with others at times of distress and instability, and during recovery. The study received ethical approval from the necessary research ethics committees, all participants gave their consent, names are pseudonyms and some details have been obscured or redacted.

## **Visual imagery as experiential research**

How we use visual methods depends on our theoretical and methodological frameworks (Reavey, 2012; Rose, 2001). We work from a hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective that privileges participants' subjective experience of what-it-is-like and what-it-means (see Boden et al., 2018 for a detailed discussion of this method in the context of interpretative phenomenological analysis). However, we believe the RMI is flexible enough to integrate with other

theoretical perspectives that take an experiential approach and this chapter will take this broader view.

The RMI emerged out of empirical and methodological work that sought to use the phenomenological and hermeneutic power of image creation as part of a multi-modal approach to understanding emotional and relational experience (Attard, Larkin, Boden, & Jackson, 2017; Boden, 2013; Boden & Eatough, 2014). Drawing, as one type of visual method, expresses subjective experience by spontaneously capturing the texture of an experience. This approach can support participants to share experiences that are difficult to verbalise, complex, diffuse or ambiguous. Drawing, like any method of communication, is not a direct 'representation' of the participant's experience. Instead meaning is *impressed* upon the paper (Schneier, 1989), leaving behind a subjective residue (Hustvedt, 2005) of the person and their experience. Drawings are not only visual, they tap into several sensory registers at once, and the resulting pictures can be rich with meaning (Malchiodi, 2005). Additionally, drawing requires the participant to be bodily engaged with their bodily lived experience, as they creatively explore how to communicate it (Malchiodi, 2005; Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Looking at the drawing-as-object *and* observing the drawing-as-process also involves the *viewer* in a bodily, multi-sensory and non-sequential experience (Hustvedt, 2005). Both participant and researcher are engaged bodily in a drawing methodology.

Drawings have a tangibility and stability that verbal accounts do not (Hustvedt, 2005), meaning they can provide a vehicle through which parallel or subsequent verbal discussion can take place. For some researchers, drawing is solely a method of eliciting verbal data, and it seems that drawing does encourage participants to explore less familiar aspects of their experience. Participants often switch to more metaphorical and poetic language, as they try out ways to communicate the aesthetic qualities of their experience (Todres, 2008). Thus visual methods do seem to deepen the quality of the verbal data. However, drawings can go beyond this, providing the 'thick depiction' that complements the 'thick description' of verbal data (Kirova & Emme, 2006, p2). Drawings are a source of meaning both independently of, and in dialogue with, the verbal narrative, and as such they are deserving of additional interpretative analysis (Boden & Eatough, 2014). For this reason, we have included a framework below to support analysis of the visual data so that it can be understood as data in its own right, providing a secondary mode through which to interpret the participants' experiences.

### **Exploring relational experience through drawings**

Intersubjective and social experience is a key aspect of our lives and fundamental to our wellbeing (e.g. Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, traditional psychological research interviews tend to overlook this, perhaps taking an overly individualistic and internalistic approach to understanding lived experience. Social experience has not been neglected within the quantitative paradigm, and some of this research does result in visual imagery. For example, social network analysis and sociomapping techniques produce visual diagrams that picture quantitative data sets

reflecting density and connectivity in large networks. However, there is less research on how individuals subjectively experience the *quality* and *texture* of their relational lives, and qualitative tools are needed to support this work.

The complexities of relational experience are particularly suited to visual-spatial representations, and this has long been exploited by practitioners and researchers in the fields of psychology and sociology who have attempted to capture relational life. From the field of psychotherapy, there are genograms (Bowen; Jolly, Froom, & Rosen, 1980) and sociograms (Moreno, 1951), which are systematic and standardised approaches to capturing ‘objective’ and some ‘subjective’ information about social groups. Extending this, the RMI supports participants to map their relational experience subjectively and idiosyncratically. Participants are the experts in their relational life, and in the RMI it is up to them to determine how they wish to present and explore that with the researcher.

### **The Relational Mapping Interview**

The RMI is a semi-structured indepth interview protocol that incorporates a drawing activity (Boden et al., 2018). Unlike a traditional semi-structured interview, RMIs follow an ‘interview arc’ and use the format of ‘draw–talk–draw–talk’. The RMI aims to be an encounter, not an interrogation, and so is not a linear set of questions but a framework for communicating relational experience in non-linear ways. The RMI provides a skeleton interview structure, and supports the creativity of the interviewer and participant. The interviewer is not required to prophesy the most significant aspects of the experience under investigation, as the RMI supports emergence and novelty, whilst providing some scaffolding to ‘hold’ both researcher and participant. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p48) suggest that interviews are an opportunity to ‘wander together with’ the participant, and the RMI draws on that ethos.

#### ***The interview arc: touchstones for navigating the relational world of the participant***

Researchers using semi-structured interviews typically take into account concerns such as building rapport and the sensitivity of questions when developing their interview schedule. The RMI emphasises the importance of this type of higher-order structuring of the interview encounter. Interviews – like films, music or novels – seem to be most satisfactory when they follow an arc. The touchpoints described below help create an ‘interview arc’ that guides the interviewer and participant to create something together that feels ethically and methodologically ‘whole’.

In an RMI, the interviewer’s contribution is predominantly spontaneous and focuses on enquiring into the participants’ emerging image of their relational experience and their account of that. To aid both interviewer and participant to navigate the participant’s experience, the RMI consists of four touchpoints: (1) mapping the self; (2) mapping important others; (3) standing back; and

(4) considering change. These touchpoints can be applied to any research topic that centres on relational experience, without the need to create a new interview schedule each time, although researchers may want to think about preparing prompts or probing questions to help explore their particular research question.

### ***The draw-talk-draw-talk process as a way of getting experience-near***

It is important that people are not caught unawares about the drawing task, so information sheets should clarify the request that participants draw/diagram/map their relational networks. The RMI should begin with a preamble (see Appendix A) to reassure and orient the participant. Some people can find a drawing task, or the appearance of a blank piece of paper, to be intimidating, and we wanted to avoid raising any shame or embarrassment in our participants. We set up the task as informally as possible, and supported the participants to find their own ways to engage with it, as simply or creatively as they wished.

### ***Mapping the self***

The participant was invited to ‘represent yourself on the map in any way you wish’. Sometimes this instruction was enough to enable the participant to start the drawing process. Sometimes participants hesitated and so we added, ‘you can use words, symbols or images – whatever you prefer’, to support them to find their own way forward. Once they come to a pause, the interviewer’s task is to simply explore what they have drawn. One way to do that is to state what you see. This type of observational comment, that carefully notices the colour, position or content of the drawing, is typically enough to elicit more detail. For example: ‘you have drawn a heart’; ‘you have put musical notes around this’; ‘I see you are now adding something else’, etc. It is important not to interpret here. For example, a heart may not necessarily mean a loving relationship with this participant. Allow the participant to lead the way in their relational world. Typically this part of the interview is brief, but comments made at the start often seem to resonate with later narratives, and may provide interesting insights for analysis. For example, Hari drew himself as a small circle that he described as a sun or star, linking this with his spirituality. Later he drew his mother as a huge swirling universe, naming the infinite love he had for her. Jake drew himself at the corner of the page as a tiny figure with his mouth sewn together. Later, he described his distrust of others and his reluctance to speak out about his distress.

### ***Mapping others***

The second touchpoint typically takes most of the time and involves mapping relationships with important others initially, then anyone else the participant wants to include. Participants are invited to start by mapping the relationship that is most important to them. A similar process follows, of stating what you

see, prompting and enquiring. In our approach this draws on phenomenological principles, for example, bracketing, or better, ‘bridling’ (Dahlberg, 2006, p16) our assumptions and interpretations, and instead asking open questions or making reflective statements. Our prompts centred around understanding the quality and texture of the relationship, how it was sustained (i.e. activities, interests, means of communication) and how it had been impacted by the participants’ life situations (e.g. experiencing psychosis). This process of draw–talk–draw–talk continues with the participant adding further important people to the map, and with the interviewer’s support, describing those relationships in as much detail as they can. Our participants described and represented a wide range of relationships, including friends, family, professionals and faith/community figures. They also included pets, the deceased, deities, organisations, and also occasionally creative activities (specifically music and art). Some participants used more than one page.

We think it is imperative that researchers are open to how participants interpret the task and to be equally curious about each named relationship, regardless of its type. After mapping the important relationships in the person’s life, the interview can then enquire into other people the participant may know. This could include people who are part of the participant’s social landscape, but who may be less well known (e.g. shop-keepers, teachers, receptionists or anyone with whom they have regular interactions). We found that some participants named significant others but did not want to add them to their maps, and we respected that, asking instead whether they would still like to say something about those connections, or not.

### ***Standing back***

Standing back involves a shift from the ‘close’, experience–near, idiographic and phenomenological enquiry of the mapping stage, to a more reflective, explicitly integrative and interpretative stance, where the participant is supported to make meaning from their map. The participant is invited to (metaphorically) ‘step back’ from their picture in order to absorb the map–as–a–whole. Image making can enable people to experience themselves and their life narratives differently, hence its use in art therapy (Gladding, 1992), so in this moment, participants may experience themselves in a new or unfamiliar way. The drawing though can also act as an anchor through which participants can gain some distance or explore a new perspective on their familiar situation (Malchiodi, 2005). The standing back phase enables participants to integrate and interpret their experience, and to make ‘big picture’ statements. For example, Karina counted everyone she had drawn and exclaimed ‘that’s many people actually!’ whereas Manu, who felt like the map reflected his ‘whole life’, seemed less positive: ‘to see all the relationships with everyone. I don’t know, it’s quite ... It doesn’t feel like a lot’.

At this point, the interviewer can explore specific ‘themes’ that may have recurred during the interview, but which have not yet been fleshed out (Appendix B). Jake, for example, had mentioned trust several times in regard to individual

relationships. When we looked at the map as a whole he made the link that all three of his ‘important’ people had ‘betrayed my trust once, so I don’t think I can fully trust, ever’.

For Hari, who had initially drawn himself as the star/sun, he looked at the relative sizes of the separate images he had used to represent all his important people:

*Hari:* Yeah, it’s more that, I dunno, I feel like the size, the size is like, I should have done that [the sun/star], I should have done that a little bit smaller.

*I:* Why would that be smaller?

*Hari:* Because I probably don’t really care for myself or love myself as much as I should.

### ***Considering change***

The final touchpoint explores what has changed in the past. In the case of the psychosis study, this focused on the participants’ crisis, hospitalisation, and so on. The interview concludes by exploring what changes, if any, participants would like to make in an *ideal* future. If there is a significant event on the horizon, either specific to the individual (in our case this included discharge from the service, return to study and moving home) or specific to the sample, then this phase of the interview could also explore those.

The ideal-future question allows participants to explore how they would like their relational lives to be – their expectations, beliefs, fantasies and hopes – however, this also brings new information about how things are presently. Hari suggested he would want ‘maybe to love myself more’, indicating an awareness of self-neglect and low self-esteem. Ceri wanted her deceased relatives to still be alive and her ex-partner to have disappeared. She added: ‘my dad might be on the map if he changed his ways’. This seems to point to her loneliness, frustration and ambivalent hope for future reconciliations.

The interview closes by asking participants whether there is anything else they want to tell the interviewer, and exploring how it has been for them to share their relationships in this way. This is both substantively interesting and an opportunity to check the impact on the participant’s wellbeing before the interview is completed.

### **Why analyse drawings? A framework for an interpretative experiential analysis**

Images, like metaphors, are ambiguous, polysemous and emergent (Dake & Roberts, 1995; Reavey, 2011). From our hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective, the maps created in the RMI are data in their own right, deserving of as much analytic attention as the verbal accounts. Given our interpretative stance, we are not suggesting that any one ‘truth’ can be revealed through analysis of the drawing, but rather explore the dialogic possibilities of bringing



the visual, verbal and reflexive material of the interview together, to deepen the analysis as a whole. In this vein, Kirova and Emme (2006, p22) argue for an ‘*expanded hermeneutic phenomenology*’ that takes into account any and all relevant data sources, including imagery and bodily experience. Drawing on their work, and the multi-modal method described by Boden and Eatough (2014) for use with abstract drawings, we have provided a framework (Table 20.1) to help guide analysis of the visual material. We approach this analysis with the theoretical lens of hermeneutic-phenomenology, but it is possible that this framework could be adapted to suit other experiential approaches.

Table 20.1 Framework for analysing the relational maps (extended from Boden et al., 2018) and examples of the type of analytic comments that can be made

<i>Analytic questions</i>	<i>Examples of some possible analytic comments on Karina’s image (Figure 20.1)</i>
1. What type of map has been created? (e.g. shapes, hierarchy, list, mind map, extended visual metaphor, visual narrative, unconnected metaphors, unconnected representations, etc.)	A line drawing of a portrait picture with literal and symbolic elements
2. How is the participant represented in the map? (location, colour, shape, texture, participant’s and researcher’s ascribed meanings)	Centrally in portrait style, sitting down, surrounded by relationships. Sitting down = ‘because I’m getting much better now’. The participant is surrounded by butterflies, musical notes and the sun because she says she likes these things. Butterflies could be interpreted as indicating lightness, beauty, love, freedom, transformation, femininity, fragility, happiness/summery quality, etc. Music could indicate creativity, playfulness, expressiveness, tonality, etc.  The sun here seems to represent optimism, positivity, recovery, hopefulness, happiness.  She notes she is ‘putting just a little bit about me’ – these elements are chosen to represent just some aspects of her personality. (What is hidden/not represented?)
3. How many people are included in the map? Is anyone left out but named?	Seven. The participant seems to relate ambivalently to the cousin she draws on the map last. She names two further cousins who she is less close to and doesn’t include in the map

(Continued)

Table 20.1 (Cont.)

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<i>Analytic questions</i>	<i>Examples of some possible analytic comments on Karina's image (Figure 20.1)</i>
4. In what ways are other people represented? (literally, metaphorically, named or not)	People are represented literally, with details of their personalities and interests figuratively and literally represented around them. Each person was named and her relationship with them was discussed in some detail
5. In what order were elements drawn?	(1) Herself and the sun, butterflies and musical notes; (2) her sister (drawn sitting close) and the ball; (3) her mother (further away) with a bag and speech bubble; (4) her goddaughter, separately but close by with musical notes; (5) two school friends were drawn – one by her mother, and (6) one behind her with a heart. (7) Finally her cousin, further away, with an easel and brush. She adds grass tufts as she goes along. The last element to be drawn is the raindrops
6. In what ways are the relationships and their qualities represented? (e.g. symbols)	Everyone is drawn sitting or standing on the same grass, suggesting a shared perspective or ground. They face the same way, perhaps also indicating shared direction.  Relationships are also represented spatially. Those closest to the participant occupy the space closest to her and people with whom she has more ambivalent or distant relationships (emotionally and geographically) are further away.  The relationship between the participant and her sister is represented in their physical overlapping quality, and also the flower symbol, which represents the transformation of their relationship from anger and conflict during her psychosis to being 'really close' now: 'from a tiny, tiny flower it became a really big and beautiful flower'.  Her school friends are described as 'like family' and they are drawn overlapping with her sister and mother respectively. The participant reports never arguing with the friend who she positions directly behind her

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(Continued)

Table 20.1 (Cont.)

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<i>Analytic questions</i>	<i>Examples of some possible analytic comments on Karina's image (Figure 20.1)</i>
	<p>and her sister. This relationship was unaffected by her psychosis. She draws a heart on this person as she is her 'bestest friend'. In contrast, her relationship with her mother and the friend positioned there were both marked by conflict during her psychosis. This may indicate residual emotional distance between the participant and those with whom there has been conflict without full reparation as they are positioned slightly distantly. The participant describes conflict and full resolution with her sister and no conflict with her friend, and these are drawn closest to her. Additionally, there is a puddle (of rain?) that isn't commented upon</p>
7. In what ways are people interrelated? (i.e. location, density, fluidity, separation, hierarchy, contained, overlapping, relative size, relative positioning – and how does this relate to their emotional or geographic accessibility?)	People are clustered. The participant, her best friend and sister are interconnected. Her mother and friend make a second cluster to the right. Her goddaughter and cousin are separately to the left. Her cousin is 'very far away' geographically, but also seems to represent an ambivalent relationship – they were close, but less so since she visited during her psychosis
8. What kinds of relationships and types of people are represented? (identity, role, age, longevity, category, status, etc.)	Family members and friends only. (Identities/roles could be listed here, e.g. sister, cousin, friend ... and further information about each relationship, e.g. close, distant, complicated etc.)
9. How can the overall tone and impression of the image be characterised? (e.g. style, strength of expression, expressive/affective content, effect upon viewer)	Naïve, childlike drawing style and portrait setting give a nostalgic and idealised childhood and familial impression. The effect is normalising and reassuring. (Something that seems to affect the participant too, when she sounds surprised and reassured to notice how many relationships she 'trusts in' at the end of the interview.) There is something sweet and non-confrontational about the image. I also experienced the participant herself in a similar way.

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(Continued)

Table 20.1 (Cont.)

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<i>Analytic questions</i>	<i>Examples of some possible analytic comments on Karina's image (Figure 20.1)</i>
10. How can any metaphorical content be categorised? (normative symbols, spontaneous/ idiosyncratic metaphors, personal metaphors/visual representations of nicknames, etc., narrative metaphors, relational metaphors)	<p>The raindrops are the only hint of anything 'negative' or troubling in the image, and are added right at the end.</p> <p>Another perspective on the picture is that everyone is facing the viewer as if posing for a camera. This implies there is something staged or performative in this image. Perhaps it is not entirely spontaneous.</p> <p>The whole drawing is a black line drawing. Nothing is filled in or coloured. This leaves me feeling there is something insubstantial, hollow or delicate about the image. However, simultaneously the lines are confidently made and not sketchy. There is something definite and precise about them.</p> <p>There is a cartoon or graphic-novel quality to the image that gives it a slightly fantastical quality. The people are real and unreal at the same time. This is echoed by the mix of literal and figurative imagery</p>
11. What are the meanings associated with any metaphorical content?	<p>Normative symbols (weather = emotion) and pictorial representation of personal characteristics (artistic, musical, chatty) and idiosyncratic habits (keeps pills in her bag)</p> <p>The sun and raindrops represent the happy and difficult times the participant has been through – they are the emotional tone of the relationships. The sun is drawn right at the start of the picture, whereas the rain is an afterthought (when asked if she wants to change anything). The rain represents: 'when things aren't easy, and we don't have an umbrella'. Other figurative elements (the easel, notes, ball, speech bubble and hand-bag) represent the activities and personalities of each person</p>

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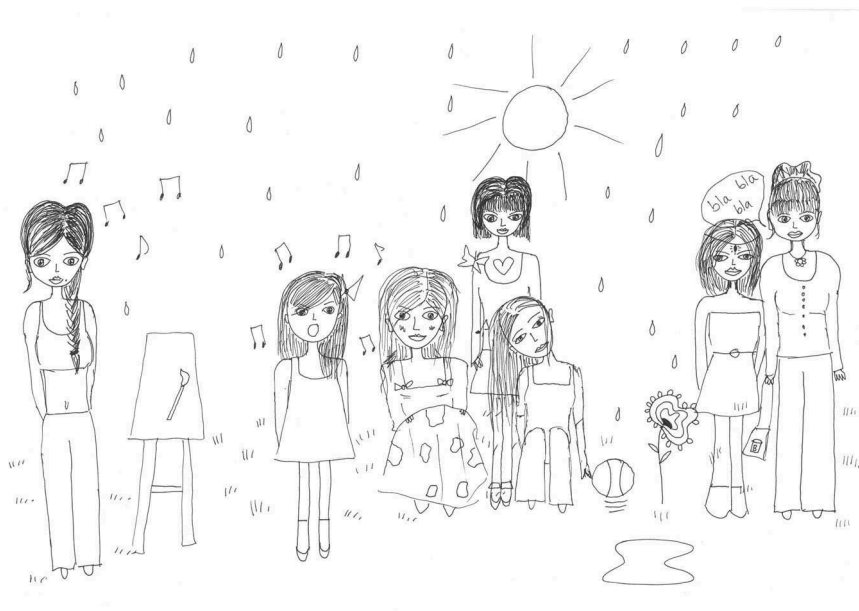


Figure 20.1 Karina's relational map using figurative and metaphorical elements.

In our psychosis research, there were many ways that participants chose to map their relationships. There were several structures, spider diagrams and visual lists, often using names and sometimes decorated, for example with hearts, or connected by lines or dashes. Karina chose to create an image akin to a family portrait (Figure 20.1). Each person was represented literally but she added symbols, including raindrops, butterflies and musical notes, to describe their personalities and her relationships to them. There were several participants who used symbols or metaphorical images to represent individual people in their lives. Sometimes there were connections between these, such as in Hari's drawing of the star and universe.

After himself, the first person Hari added to the map was his girlfriend (Figure 20.2). He drew an amethyst crystal to represent her. He described how he had once given an amethyst to his mother, and when a piece had broken off, he had given that fragment to his girlfriend. From this symbol, which was beautifully drawn, Hari explored themes of support and dependence. The mother/girlfriend connection in his image of the crystal indicates Hari's attempts to reconcile his image of his girlfriend as simultaneously a mother-like carer:

*Hari:* I chose to represent because right now she's like the main, she's basically like the main focus in my life that's holding me together and who's always caring for me and who's always, who does everything for me basically, to make sure, to make sure I'm alright. She just looks after me really.

*I:* So she's really there for you, she's looking after you.

*Hari:* Yeah, always. [...] It's almost like I'm a little child and she needs to make sure, make sure, make sure that I'm on time for things like this, makes sure I'm eating well and stuff like that really, just general caring things.

A theme of breaking up/holding together is echoed in the narrative about the broken piece of the crystal, and in Hari's metaphorical language. Here it is his girlfriend who holds him together. Later he expresses his sadness about his family break-up (his siblings and mother are living in different places, he is essentially homeless) and, when asked about his ideal future, he states his wish that he could bring his family back together.

### **The talk–draw–talk–draw process: supporting narrative integration at a metaphorical level**

Two further participants took the invitation to map their relationships as an opportunity to draw an integrated visual metaphor. Aaliya created a garden metaphor and Robert drew a series of interrelated objects. His family was represented as an apple tree, with himself as a fallen apple, lying in the grass. The branches of the tree were full of mirrors ('I see myself in my family, you know, it's like I'm helping them. I'm trying to help them, but it's like I don't know which way round it is') and question marks ('It's so confusing'). He added arms hugging the other apples ('I need to like keep people feeling good in some way'). The tree trunk sprouted a leg that kicked out at him (the fallen apple), aiming him either towards a target, or towards 'a vast ocean' full of sharks. Each of these narrative elements was drawn as Robert was talking and telling his account of his relational experience. This was not a completed narrative. Robert was uncertain how this story was going to end. When asked what he would like to change, he crossed out the target and drew a new one much closer to the tree. He also drew a curved line around the shark-infested water, sectioning it off from the rest of the picture. His image draws on many normative metaphors and cultural symbols, such as the religiosity of the apple tree and the fallen fruit. The developmental and recovery targets he felt pushed towards by his family and the service, which were associated with expectations around heteronormative masculinity, were concretely represented as a target:

You have to become a man, you have to get a job, you gotta get healthy, you know, you gotta be a contributing member of society and you know, [his care-coordinator] mentioned like, um, girls and I'm just like I can't even think about that right now.

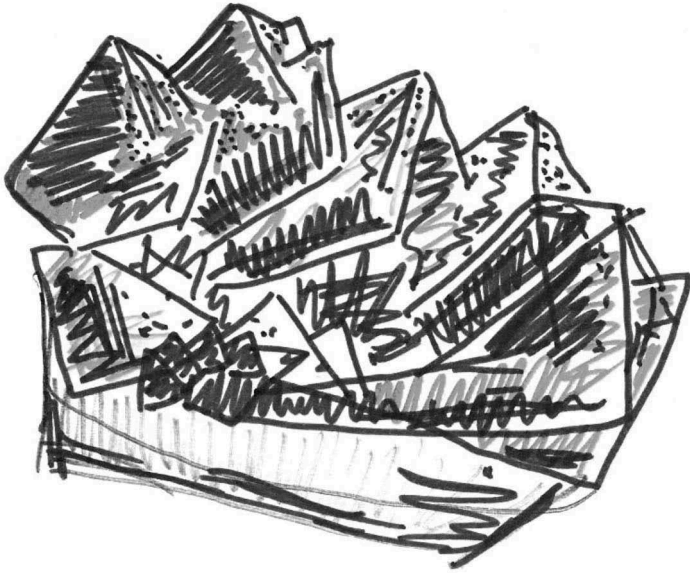


Figure 20.2 Extract of Hari's drawing: an amethyst crystal to represent his girlfriend.

In our (British) cultural landscape, the image of a shark-infested sea is a normative metaphor for danger, and Robert was trying to stay safe when it came to his relational life.

Aaliya drew herself as a flower (Figure 20.3 shows how Aaliya developed her drawing through four phases, adding new elements to represent different relationships and new layers of her relational experience). She describes the flower as something 'innocent' and vulnerable to the threat of others:

*Aaliya:* It's something like that people would usually say 'oh like it's quite nice', but it's quite like a simple flower, like it can be easily crushed and like I guess some people kind of like, erm, would underestimate it.

Next, she drew sun and raindrops, describing these as her friends. Aaliya has minimal family support, but valued her friendships. Her friends seem to be a powerful influence on her wellbeing and she is ambivalent about maintaining contact with them:

### The Relational Mapping Interview

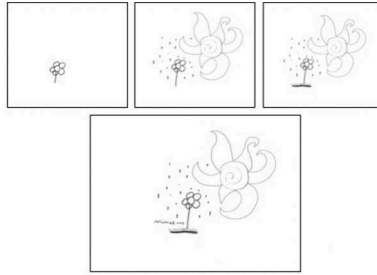


Figure 20.3 Aaliya's drawing: the first three images (left to right) indicate her steps towards creating the final drawing (the larger image).

*Aaliya:* They give me like the kind of like support I need, so they're the sun and the rain, but, like I guess if you get too much sun or too much rain it can also be like negative for a flower. [...] Like I can't always have them around, otherwise it'll be a bit over-powering, and I guess sometimes they don't really understand that, or sometimes they'll like back off too much and I won't have the support I need.

Thirdly, Aaliya adds grass and ground under the flower:

*Aaliya:* It's just going to be the grass, erm ... [drawing] maybe the ground beneath that as well and that would probably be my mum, and someone that I kind of like rely on for support and [pause, looking emotional ...] [...] to an extent the grass also needs the sun and the rain, she needs me to be stable for like beauty to grow underneath her and stuff.

Aaliya's emotionality, her tentativeness about naming her mum ('probably') and the confusion in her language regarding who supports who ('she needs me to be stable'; 'beauty to grow *underneath* her') and her consideration that her mum (the grass) also needs the support of others (the sun/rain) were indicative of the complex interwoven and reciprocal relationships she had with her mother, who also experienced mental health problems, and her friends.

When we turned to the fourth touchpoint, 'considering change', which was towards the end of our interview, Aaliya added the word 'animal' next to the flower and drew an arrow pointing towards it:

*Aaliya:* I would rather be in the food chain or something, the animal eating the flower, rather than the like weak flower being trampled on underneath.

By adding a final element to her drawing, Aaliya shifts her visual narrative into a hopeful and more empowered future image. Taken as a whole, Aaliya's drawing



indicates the tensions inherent in her relational life – being trampled underfoot versus being underestimated, the heat of the sun and the drowning rain, being eaten or doing the eating. These aspects seem to encapsulate her psychosocial struggle to survive relationally, to recover, and her hopes to flourish in the future. Both Robert and Aaliya’s drawings – as simplistic as they may first appear – illuminate not just their own, idiosyncratic experiences, but key relational tensions apparent within the whole psychosis project, specifically the challenge to negotiate intersubjective boundaries.

## **Conclusions**

To date the RMI has been used in research about relational experience in young people with psychosis, international students, care-leavers and recipients of peer-support interventions. In all cases participants appear to find the method acceptable and enjoyable. At the least, this approach helps make something intimate, complex and taken-for-granted into something that can be shared and explored within an interview context. In some cases, the RMI exceeded this by enabling participants to share their troubling, ambivalent or uncertain relational experiences in a way that does not require a neat, linear narrative – or even a verbal account. It positions participants as the ‘expert’ in their relational lives, and supports a sense of empowerment within their relational context (for example, with who is and is not included on the map).

The RMI and the multi-modal analysis of the drawings help researchers grasp the complexities of relational experience. They also offer the potential to be adapted in several ways. For example, the method is suitable for exploring relational experience with other important factors in the participants’ lives, such as in the doctoral work of Sarah Bögle, who has used the approach to map her participants’ experience of mental health services and psychiatric medication. The RMI provides data that is rich and polysemous, whilst also being experience-near and subjective in focus. When both the verbal and visual data are analysed, researchers are supported to produce accounts that go beyond the linear and rehearsed accounts of relationality, and to tap into the multiple sensory registers of hard-to-articulate relational experience, that which is idiosyncratic, ambivalent, ambiguous and often emotionally charged.

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## **Note**

1 This chapter is based on an earlier paper which focuses on using the Relational Mapping Interview within the context of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which

was published as: Boden, Z.V.R., Larkin, M. & Iyer, M. (2018). Picturing ourselves in the world: Drawings, IPA and the Relational Mapping Interview, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2018.1540679

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

Example of the preamble from a Relational Mapping Interview from the project ‘Disrupted Relationships: Psychosis, Connectedness and Emerging Adulthood’ (2015–16). In this project the participants were young people (18–25) who were under the care of Early Intervention in Psychosis services.

### *Preamble (after briefing has taken place and consent has been gained)*

What I’d like us to do today is to make a kind of map together that shows all the relationships you have with different people in your life, and how your experience of psychosis might or might not play a part in those relationships.

If it’s OK with you, I will ask you some questions to help you think about different people you might want to put on the map. There’s lots of different pens, crayons and stickers you can use to show different aspects of your relationships if you want to, and it’s completely up to you how you choose to put them on to the map. You can draw pictures, or use shapes, or just write names – it’s completely up to you how you represent them. There’s no right or wrong way to do it. And I’m interested in what you tell me about your relationships as well as what you draw on the map, so it doesn’t matter if it gets messy or if you can’t capture exactly what you want to say about the relationships. As long as you can also tell me about your drawing, that will be great.

Do you want to ask me any questions about it before we start?

## Appendix B

Possible prompts to support the mapping and standing back phases in a Relational Mapping Interview

### **Exploring specific relationships**

- In what way are they important to you?
- How do you feel about them?
- How do you think they feel about you?
- Has this relationship always been like this? Or has it changed at any point over time?
- How did you meet them? Where did you meet them? How long have you known them? (if appropriate)
- How do you keep in touch with them? How often are you in touch? Do you keep in touch any other way?
- What kinds of things do you do together/speak about together?

### *Appendix B*

- What kinds of things do you have in common? What kinds of differences do you have?
- Is there anything you look forward to about spending time with them?
- What do you get out of spending time with them? How does it make you feel? How does it affect you?
- What do you think they get out of spending time with you?
- Do you think you'll stay in touch in the same way with this person in future? Do you think they'll stay in your life?
- Do they know any of the other people you've drawn on the map?

#### **Exploring the map-as-a-whole**

- Are these people clustered together/separated for a reason?
- How does your relationship with these people differ from these people?
- Is there anyone else that we've not spoken about yet? Do you want to add them or not? Why?
- Looking at your map now as a whole, do you notice anything about it?
- What are you feeling/thinking/remembering now, looking at this map of your relationships?
- Where are you in relation to the other people on your map?

# 21

## BUILDING VISUAL WORLDS

### Maps as a tool for exploring located experience

*Laura McGrath and Shauna Mullarkey*

#### **Map making and qualitative research in psychology**

Maps are familiar, everyday and yet highly complex entities. As Brotton (2012: 5) outlines:

a map is both a physical object and a graphic document, it is both written and visual [... it] draws on artistic methods to create an ultimately imaginative representation of an unknowable object (the world); but it is also shaped by scientific principles.

The maps we make, in other words, draw on multiple cultural and conceptual resources, are objects constructed through, and located in, culture, as well as acting to shape the world. The history and use of maps, therefore, are far richer than cartographical description. As Haraway (2000: 113) says: 'maps are models of worlds crafted through and for specific practices of intervening and ways of life'. Medieval European 'mappa mundi', for instance, showed a religious world, with east at the top, representing heaven, less concerned with geographical accuracy than the representation of faith. A few centuries later, the race to definitively measure longitude contrastingly encapsulated the expansionist era of European empire; here maps were used to span, measure and colonise the world (Brotton, 2012). Maps, however seemingly objective, are always partial and political; they always create as well as express meaning.

These examples are of maps which represent a shared understanding of the world, which encapsulate a culture. Perhaps of more interest to qualitative psychologists is the rich history of subjective, participatory map making. In a sense, all maps are subjective, in that they represent the world from a certain perspective.

Researchers have, however, attempted to capitalise on the multiple, rich and layered nature of map making to explore subjective meaning making. Lynch (1960) was a pioneer in this area, creating 'mental maps' by asking participants to draw the significant features of the city where they lived, as a route to understanding how the participants organised and categorised information about their spatial environments. As an urban planner, Lynch was interested in capturing the experience and meaning of spaces: how people used place, as well as how it was objectively organised.

An additional tradition in this area is community participatory mapping, a well-established technique used in geography, planning and community development (e.g. Chambers, 1994; Herlihy & Knapp, 2003; Herlihy, 2003; Mapedza et al., 2003; White & Pettit, 2004). Rather than a cartographical approach, where maps represent the physical environment in a literal and accurate manner, participatory maps are subjective representations of spaces or communities. Used to map community networks and relationships, participatory mapping processes can help to facilitate the communication between communities and outsiders, such as policy makers (Chambers, 1994).

Maps have also been used to understand the impact of environmental changes, such as deforestation, on how people experience their communities (Mapedza et al., 2003), as well as to generate located, emic measures of wellbeing (White & Pettit, 2004). Participatory maps are shared, living documents constructed through a process of engagement, less interested in objectivity than meaning.

Increasingly, maps have also been used to explore aspects of experience that fall more obviously within the remit of psychological enquiry (e.g., Guillemin, 2004; Gabb, 2009; Iantaffi, 2011; Townley et al., 2009). Townley et al. (2009), for instance, used participatory maps with mental health service users, as part of a project looking at service users' levels of community integration, mapping the 'activity spaces' of participants' everyday lives.

This rich history of map making as a tool to record, explore and share subjective experiences leads clearly to a potential role for using map making in qualitative psychological research. There are also mapping techniques and approaches which more explicitly tie together psychological experiences, such as emotions, and map making. One technological approach is Christian Nold's (2009) 'bio-mapping' of cities which merged together multiple participants' GPS and galvanic skin response data to visualise a collective affective response to different urban environments.

Another rich tradition is that of therapeutic drawing tools, which have been used to facilitate reflection on subjective experiences within therapy (Gabb, 2009; Ncube, 2010). One example of these practices is Ncube's (2006) 'Tree of Life', where participants are asked to map out different aspects of their emotional lives and relationships as the roots, trunk, surrounding ground, branches, fruits or leaves of a tree. A key part of this method is that these trees are then shared collectively to make a 'forest', through which commonalities in the experiences of the group can be identified. Visualising emotional experiences and relationships in this way thus helps to: facilitate shared understanding; point to collective and social sources of distress; and potentially build community.

Ncube's (2006) approach, in common with many therapeutic drawing techniques, is clearly highly generative, but is focused on representing an overall life narrative, rather than everyday located experience; such narratives are broadly organised by time rather than space (Bruner, 1991). Other mapping tools, such as the well-established systemic therapy genogram, might map relationships (e.g. Lewis, 1989), but tend to not include their location. Nold's (2009) approach, on the other hand, embeds people's affective responses in space, but has no way to capture the subjective meaning which can help explain spikes in affective arousal in particular places. In trying to explore the potential of maps for facilitating exploration of the 'who, what, when, where, why and how' of located experiences, we will here explore two approaches which attempt to bring together subjective experience and spatial location.

## **Empirical material**

The examples drawn upon in this chapter are from two studies, both of which explored spatial aspects of experience using different map-making techniques. The first study looked at staff experiences of living in an intentional community. The second looked at the role of space in experiences of mental distress (McGrath, 2012; McGrath & Reavey, 2013, 2015, 2016). We will discuss these in turn before drawing together some insights from using map making in both studies.

### ***Study 1: emotion mapping in intentional communities***

This study was carried out in an intentional community run for adults with learning disabilities in the UK. Intentional communities are defined as those which are set up 'purposely and voluntarily' to solve a 'specific set of cultural and social problems' (Brown, 2002: 12). They have a coherent ethos, set apart from everyday society, both physically and in terms of relational practices. Brown (2002) outlines that many intentional communities aim to form relationships which are egalitarian and spontaneous in nature.

The intentional community of interest here was set up with such an ethos; members are called to live in solidarity and mutuality with one another, based on the principles of friendship (Vanier, 2012). This style of relationship has been contrasted with other UK registered care providers for adults with learning disabilities which often advocate clear professional boundaries and establish a more hierarchical style of relationship between the service user and the professional (Cushing, 2003). In the community in question, support assistants live and work alongside adults with learning disabilities in a shared home. It provides housing, support, community living and activities for adults with learning disabilities, comprising around 100 people with and without learning disabilities (Vanier, 2012).

The original study focused on the experiences of the assistants living in the intentional community full time. Of particular interest was the experience, creation and negotiation of boundaries: psychological, spatial and emotional. For the

### Building visual worlds

assistants interviewed for this study, therefore, practices of ‘home’ and ‘work’ can be seen to be collapsed together within this single space. In this project, we were interested in the detail of this lived experience – how the assistants understood and managed boundaries within the collapsed home/work space.

To explore these issues, the second author used ‘emotion maps’, a method developed by Jacqui Gabb for both research (Gabb, 2009) and therapeutic (Gabb & Singh, 2015) purposes. In her work on family relationships, Gabb (2009) created floor plans of participants’ homes and asked them to locate different family emotional encounters they had over the period of a week using different-coloured stickers. This technique has the advantage of specifically locating the emotional encounters described, in both relational and spatial terms. For our study, the second author produced floor plans of the intentional communities where the participants lived and worked. During the interview, participants were then asked to locate emotions experienced in the house with different-colour stickers, each representing a different emotion. They were also asked to describe the reasons for including the stickers. These colours were pre-selected to represent different emotional categories, drawing on the original Gabb (2009) study. This technique successfully allowed participants to geographically orientate their emotions in the house in a concrete manner. Figure 21.1 is an example.

The use of the emotion-mapping tool hence differed from Gabb’s (2009) original study. Rather than being a version of a diary method, where participants

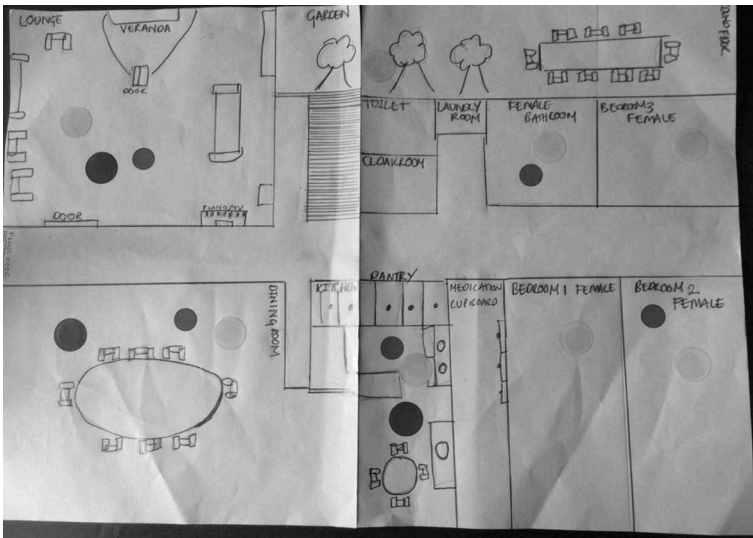


Figure 21.1 Emotion map example. Yellow stickers: feelings of joy, happiness and celebration. Red stickers: feelings of anger, frustration and conflict. Green stickers: feelings of compassion, moments of resolution, discussion and forgiveness.



note and reflect on their experiences away from the interview, this was instead a tool to generate narratives of specific and located experiences within the interview itself.

Seven assistants were interviewed for this study. The participants were of varying nationalities, including French, Syrian, German, American and British. All participants were in the age range of 21–30 and had been assistants within the community for five months or more. Four of the assistants were currently living in a residential home alongside adults with learning disabilities owned by the community. The other two participants lived in independent housing but had previously shared and worked in a home alongside adults with learning disabilities in a different country but with the same organisation and community ethos. English was the second language for four of the assistants; all the interviews were conducted in English. Ethical approval was granted from the host university.

### ***Study 2: drawing maps to explore distress***

The second study was part of an exploration of the role of space in mental health service users' experiences of distress, care and recovery (McGrath, 2012; McGrath & Reavey, 2013, 2015, 2016). The mapping part of the project comprised 17 interviews conducted with current mental health service users. The aim was to explore the role of material space in service users' experiences, and hence methodology was sought which could enable participants to discuss these parts of their experience. As Bruner (1991) points out, verbal narratives are normatively organised in terms of time, or chronological life events. As such, issues of space and context are more easily lost. Visual materials have been argued to make such contexts more visible (e.g. Bolton et al., 2001; Hodgetts et al., 2007; Radley & Taylor, 2003; Reavey, 2011), and were hence chosen to help explore the spatial aspects of service users' experiences.

Interviews were structured in three parts. Firstly, participants were asked to: 'draw a map or representation of the places where you go as part of service use'. Participants were asked to include in the drawing three things: who they saw there, what they did there and how they felt when they were there. Participants were provided with an A3 pad of paper and a selection of materials. Participants were then asked to describe each place in turn, and then rank the places they had drawn from where they liked being the most to least, and describe the reasons for these rankings. This procedure was then repeated for the second request: 'draw a map or representation of the places you go to in your everyday life which are not a part of service use'. Participants were asked to discuss the same three characteristics of these places: what they did there, who they saw there and how they felt there. Finally, participants were asked some general questions about the relationship between space and their experiences of distress, such as: 'are there any particular places you go to when distressed?'

The ways in which participants engaged with the task varied greatly, and instructions were left deliberately vague. This was to ensure that the task facilitated

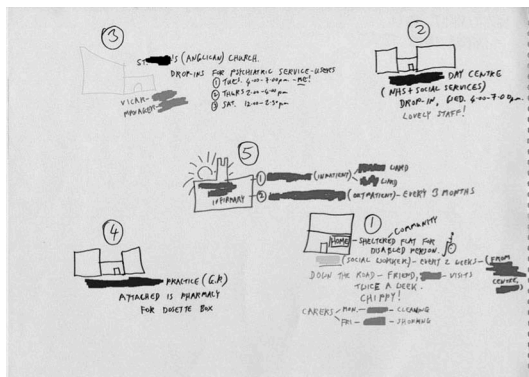


Figure 21.2 Bill’s map of service use spaces. Most maps included a mixture of writing and drawing. Numbers are ranked from place most liked being, to least. Identifying names have been removed.

the participants’ narratives in ways which made sense to them, rather than being prescribed by the researcher. The idea was that the map, or drawing, was a sense-making tool, not a literal or cartographical representation of the ‘reality’ of the space(s). Some drew only one map, whereas others produced several pages of drawings. Some were keen to be geographically accurate, while others drew more abstract maps. Figure 21.2 is one example of the latter.

The participants ranged in age from 25 to 67, with a broadly equal sex ratio. The primary criterion for recruitment was that the participants were living in the community and currently accessing mental health services; this common spatial experience was determined to be more meaningful than diagnosis. Participants were therefore not asked directly about their diagnoses, although most of them volunteered this information during the interview; eight were currently diagnosed with bipolar disorder and six with clinical depression. Ethical approval was granted by the host university.

### Analytical approaches

There are a variety of ways to incorporate visual material into qualitative analysis (Knowles & Sweetman, 2004; Pink, 2007; Prosser, 1998; Reavey, 2011; Rose, 2001). For both of these studies, the maps were primarily seen as sense-making tools within the interviews. Maps were not analysed in depth in terms of visual semiotics or visual culture (cf. Rose, 2001). The primary data was still the recorded interview, with the maps being primarily seen as prompts to elicit detailed and located narratives in the interview (Reavey & Prosser, 2012). Both studies employed thematic analysis, taking a broadly latent approach, with a mixture of theoretical and inductive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In both studies, we were

interested in the role of the material environment in participants' experiences, so an ontological position was adopted which understands experience as both materially located and culturally patterned. Broadly, this could be described as a 'process-relational' ontology (Brown & Stenner, 2009), which attempts to overcome the 'bifurcation of nature' (Whitehead, 1978/1929) into human and non-human components (see Latour, 2005; Stenner, 2008).

In these studies the material context of people's experiences was viewed as a 'non-human participant' (Latour, 2005) in the experiences and relationships which participants described. The specific role of the material environment in participants' experiences was understood as being emergent from the interaction between the person and their environment, drawing on ideas from ecological psychology (Kelly, 1996). In this way, we were also influenced by the argument made by human geographers that space is relational rather than static (Massey, 1994; Lefebvre, 1991). Space was hence seen as a relational process in which humans participate, rather than an inert container of experiences, existing separately from human meaning making. These theoretical concerns underpinned the analysis of data in both studies.

### **Building visual worlds: insights from using mapping in qualitative research**

Drawing together these two studies, we would like to make three claims about some potential benefits of maps and map making in the context of qualitative research in psychology. Maps are particularly good at, perhaps unsurprisingly, locating experiences, and enabling participants to explore complexity and the layered nature of their experience. We argue that this is due to two aspects of the maps: firstly, the potential of maps to help make the material facets of experiences and practices visible, and secondly the dual nature of map making, as both a process and a product.

### **Making materiality visible: maps as a tool to articulate and explore material subjectivities**

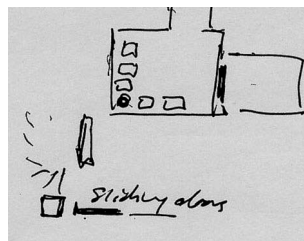
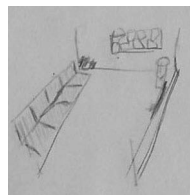
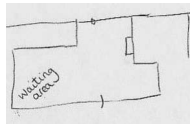
One of the most striking aspects of using both mapping techniques was the way in which making the maps and drawings in the interview led participants to highlight and discuss material aspects of their experiences. As argued above, visual methods have been argued to draw the attention to the spatial and material aspects of experiences (Bolton et al., 2001; Knowles, 2000; Reavey, 2011). In taking a photograph, for instance, one always captures the surrounding space and context as well as the person (Bolton et al., 2001). In the more fluid and participant-generated mapping methods used in these studies, spatial context is not just passively present, but actively marked and made visible by the participants. Participants could choose to include or not include any aspect of their environments on a map; what is included is, arguably, therefore significant. Inherent in a mapping methodology is that participants are invited to pinpoint and

### *Building visual worlds*

locate their experiences in specific spaces, to recall and elaborate on particular instances and experiences, whilst populating their maps. This was true in both studies, which were both effective in generating rich, specific, located descriptions of participants' experiences.

A striking example of this point came in the second study, which gave participants more power to visually construct their maps in the way that made sense to them. While many participants did not draw a large amount of detail on their maps, it was noticeable that a number of different participants' maps featured large and visible locks and barriers (Figures 21.3–21.5) (see McGrath & Reavey, 2013).

Locks and barriers are clearly highlighted throughout these drawings of participants' community mental health service buildings. Zoe described the visible lock which separated the waiting area from the 'treatment rooms', where service users were allowed through for specific appointments with psychiatrists, nurses or psychologists. Lou also described 'big locked doors' separating off the waiting area from the treatment areas, as well as a glass barrier, separating the reception staff from service users. Rachel described her actual waiting area as 'quite bright and new' but access into the building as being limited by a buzzer system, where



*Figures 21.3–21.5* Locks and barriers. Zoe's drawing of her waiting area, with a single large lock; Lou's drawing of her waiting area with the staff (in orange) behind a barrier; Rachel's drawing of her community service, with the 'blank' sliding doors and buzzer.

service users had to wait to be let through blank, signless sliding doors. Drawing locks and barriers in the maps prompted participants to also reflect on the role of these visible markers of control on their experiences in mental health services. Whilst drawing the maps, participants would either describe their reason for including an object or material feature of the space, or the researcher could draw their attention to it in a later discussion. For instance, Lou commented:

and it's kind of a relief when whoever you're waiting to see the psychiatrist or the psychologist or whoever sort of comes in and calls your name and then you get to go behind these big locked doors and go up you know into these tiny little rooms but it's it's just I dunno it's quite a bizarre space I think it's really could be more open [I:mmm] it's so enclosed and lock you're locked away like you're you're ... don't know like hmm like you're dangerous or something I guess.

*(Lou, l. 338–345)*

Whereas Karl discussed his feeling that the space placed him in the role of a 'transgressor':

I'm not in my mind you know I'm not one of those people [I:mmm] you know I'm not the transgressor [...] and I'm sitting there going oh it's you know I'm sitting here feeling sorry for myself in the waiting room but this person beside me also looks quite normal and you know normal so I guess it really can affect anyone no it's doesn't affect her except it's her job to look after the guy who's in prison.

*(Karl, l. 563–577)*

An association of mental health with risk, dangerousness and criminality (Harper, 2004; Moon, 2000; Phelan et al., 2000) can here be seen to be made particularly salient for both Lou and Karl in the space of the waiting room, in part through the visible presence of locks and barriers. Whilst the rhetoric of community mental health might emphasise inclusion and recovery (McGrath & Reavey, 2013; Spandler, 2007), the material layout of the spaces in services here instead promotes a very different message, of division, control and passivity. The use of maps and drawing here facilitated participants' expression and reflection on these points; out of everything present in these places, it was the locks and barriers they chose to represent, marking these as particularly meaningful and emotionally salient in their overall experience of services.

The mapping method helped to make the close relationship between the material environment and the subjective experiences of participants visible, to both the participants and the researcher. The role of the map making in spatialising the participants' narratives was apparent when one participant in the mental health study declined to engage in the map-making activity at all. It was noticeable that this narrative-only interview was less focused on the specifics of each place than those who did engage with the drawing process. This participant's narrative was

instead more general, organised temporally (Bruner, 1991), and did not engage with the specifics of the material location of the experiences described. This underlined the power of the map-making tool in eliciting narratives about the material contexts of participants' experiences.

### **Map making as a process and a product: possibilities and pitfalls**

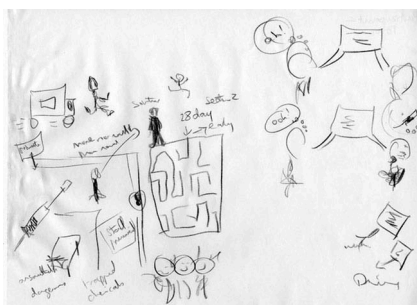
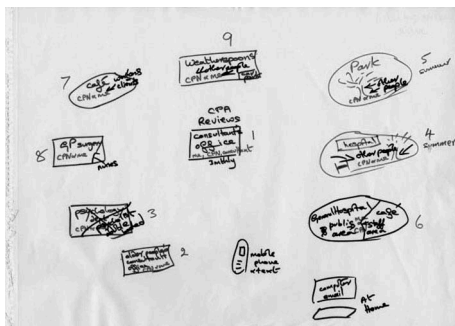
Another feature of using maps as a tool in both studies was the evolving role of the map as an object in the interview encounter. In both studies, participants tended to narrate while drawing/stickering, fusing verbal and visual representation together in a joint sense-making practice. In both studies, the specific combination of verbal and visual construction varied somewhat. Some participants explained each action they took in either drawing or stickering their maps as they went; in the mental health study, people often emphasised their points by adding to, underlining or otherwise visually reinforcing their drawings as they spoke. Other participants, however, drew/stickered first, and then waited to talk the researcher through their reasons for constructing their map in that particular way.

Whichever strategy was used, however, the making of maps in these interviews recalled Guillemin's (2004) argument that drawing is both a process and a product. The process of drawing/stickering during the interviews was important for helping participants to articulate their experience; as it was created, moreover, the map then became a material tool which participants could use to monitor, and reflect on, the overall shape of their experiences. Several participants, in both studies, commented on the usefulness of having the maps to refer to during the interviews as a visual record of their sense-making process. The maps operated as evolving, mobile objects, folded into the co-construction of the meaning making in the interview.

Encapsulating the flexible quality of the map as an object in the interview was the sheer variance in the ways in which participants interpreted the mapping task in the second study. Compare, for instance, the maps of Julie and Tom (Figures 21.6 and 21.7).

Julie's main concern was the recent closure of her community mental health buildings. The map is a litany of spaces where she had met professionals over the previous three months, with black arrows representing her feelings of invasion and lack of privacy. The ward space was absent from Julie's map, demonstrating her main concern in having no community space to safely discuss her distress. Her anger and frustration at this situation dominated the narrative of the interview. Once drawn, the map remained an active object in the room of the interview, as Julie repeatedly referred to it as available evidence, re-emphasising the impact of the cuts to her service. Many of the black arrows were indeed drawn on in later stages of the interview, to further underline her frustration with services visually as well as verbally.

Tom's map is very different, but also encapsulates his relationship with mental health services. Tom drew a typical cycle of service engagement. This started with being sectioned by the police (middle), before being detained in the



Figures 21.6 and 21.7 Julie's map of community mental health services; Tom's map of community and inpatient services.

ward. He depicts having to behave 'more normally than normal' to get out through the 'maze' of inpatient services. Community services barely feature in Tom's map, apart from disembodied, unconnected heads, talking. The only positive element of Tom's map is support from other service users (bottom middle). In the interview, the researcher asked Tom about the lack of spatial detail in his depiction of community services. He commented: 'I just give these people what they want'. Again, the 'product' nature of the map made this visible, bringing Tom's detached, passive relationship to services to the fore in the interview; he only experienced services as an unwelcome and punitive invasion on his life.

The different concerns in Tom and Julie's interviews, their very different feelings about mental health services, were hence captured in their different maps. These representations then became active participants in the interviews. Thus the map making formed part of the evolving, relational processes of sense making in the interview, providing both an assistance to the process and a product to mark and notate these relationships, experiences and feelings.

For the most part, this process/product duality was a useful and productive tool in both research projects. One incident which stands out from the second study,

however,, highlighted a potential downfall, or at least consideration, in using such methods. We reflect here on an interview conducted by Laura with 'Frank', who had been using services for around three years. The first part of the interview went well, with Frank drawing and describing in detail the range of service use spaces he attended. As with all other interviewees, Laura then moved on to the second section of the interview:

*Laura:* that's great so far but erm what I'd like you to do now is think about maybe the key places where you go that aren't to do with being a service user or aren't directly to do with being a service user is that ok

*Frank:* yeah can I just think about that for a minute can I just take a short break and use the loo

*Laura:* yeah of course

[break in interview]

At this point in the interview, Frank was clearly very uncomfortable. He came back into the room looking serious, reluctant and determined. Laura remembers wishing she had not turned over the page in the A3 booklet, as the blank sheet of paper now sat between them, ready for Frank's new map. The page looked aggressively empty, like an acre of white absence. It suddenly seemed demanding, not inviting, in its emptiness. On sitting down, Frank continued:

*Frank:* firstly I'm going to say Laura that I don't socialise a lot so I'm not going to have much to say about this [L:that's fine] so what do you want me to do this time

*Laura:* erm if you think about where you spend time as part of [everyday]

*Frank:* apart from coming here or one of the places I've described [ ... ] so what do you want me to put down for this I'm not sure [I:erm I mean just] I mean if we keep it locally you want me to start again do you

*Laura:* or we can just put them on here [turns over page and indicates initial drawing]

*Frank:* yeah I mean the only things to add would be a library a couple of libraries let's say shops but you don't want those do you a café for lunch or something because I don't go to the gym and I don't swim you know I'm a deadly boring person (laughs) [I:(laughs) it's not a] where else would you think

The status of the empty paper as a material object in the room, and the expectant beginning of a process of creation, here seemed to make visible gaps that Frank himself felt in his life. His comments here compare his life to a constructed 'normality' of busy social life, gym membership, work and swimming. This was a deeply uncomfortable moment in the interview, and Laura felt terrible for putting Frank in the position where he felt he had to justify himself in this way. Up until this point in the interview, Frank had proudly discussed the range of activities which he engaged in through service use, including research, policy and social



activities. The absence embodied by the empty page of ‘non-service use activities’ felt brutal in comparison.

This incident made it painfully clear that most of Frank’s identity and activity centred on service use, which had given him a busy and sociable life. The material object of the paper seemed to make the absences Frank felt existed in his life visible in the room, calling upon him to explain and justify his activity within the interview. This was the opposite of the intention of the method, which was to allow participants to shape their own narratives, hence reducing the space for them to feel forced into discussing aspects of their experience which they didn’t wish to share. This is an important consideration for researchers using map making, or other material practices, as a research tool. In this particular case, the solution of returning to the original map was successful in repairing the incident, enabling Frank to return to the position of proud service user activist for the remainder of the interview.

### Maps as a tool to locate and layer experiences

Map making, we have so far argued, enables participants to make visible and reflect upon material aspects of their experience, as well as acting as an evolving object in the interview, being both a process and product. Bringing together these two points, we argue here that participants are invited, through using mapping methodologies, to locate their experiences, and through the evolving nature of the methodology, also to hold and explore multiplicity and complexity in those located experiences.

Within the emotion-mapping study, for instance, participants identified the emergence of ‘emotional zones’ within the intentional community. An example of this was the bedroom as a ‘safety zone’ (Figure 21.8).

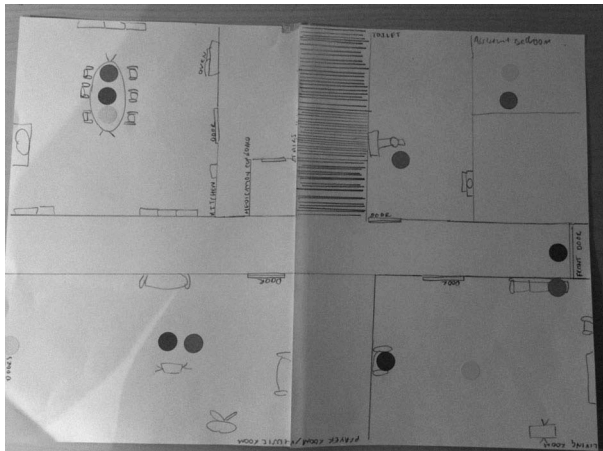


Figure 21.8 Hannah’s emotion map of the ground floor of her home. The yellow here denotes ‘peace’ and the red ‘sadness’.

All participants constructed the bedroom as a distinct territory, which provided a relatively satisfactory level of segmentation between their working and personal realms. Participants constructed the bedroom as a space within the house where they were able to express personal feelings and be themselves. Participants consistently located feelings of 'peace' within the bedroom and it provided them with an opportunity to 'relax' and express more personal feelings such as 'sadness'. The clear segmentation of more personal feelings such as 'sadness' within the private domain of the bedroom is reminiscent of the public/private division of emotion (Burkitt, 1999).

The wider space of the intentional community, was however, described as a place where public/private and work/home were blurred. Participants hence described the boundaries around their bedrooms as relatively fragile and permeable. While describing the feelings of 'frustration' in her room, for instance, Hannah said:

I think it had some frustration everywhere, my room was well, because everyone could look in from the outside, I felt like I was constantly like in a zoo, everybody could look in through my window. Because I would have to keep my curtains closed [...] And then there are people like, I was right next to the medication cupboard, so when the cupboard was open I could not leave my room, so whenever somebody was talking there it was like as if they were in my room.

You go to your room and sometimes you are just resting, you want a relaxed day, you want to leave your room in your pyjamas, but then you think, I'm working, there are other people working, like this is where I work, do I really want to be in my space of work in my pyjamas.

Within the space of the intentional community, therefore, the participants described actively arranging space and objects (clothes, curtains) to spatially mark their bedroom (Wise, 2000) as inhabiting a separate 'emotional zone' to the rest of the house. The expression and experience of the more 'private' emotions of peace and sadness were described as actively enabled through the enactment of such micro-boundaries. These 'zones' could of course have been described through careful interviewing, but the emotional mapping technique made them immediately visible – to the researcher and participant during the interview itself, and for later analysis. As discussed in the first section, participants in both interviews frequently pointed to the objects and material features of the spaces they had drawn/stickered to describe their experiences, thus presenting the specific material location of their experiences, more easily enabling a holistic analysis. The key objects here, of curtains and pyjamas, are described in detail, as participants have already been orientated to the material features of their experiences.

Both mapping techniques also provided a way for the layered and multiple nature of experience to be explored in the interview. In the intentional community study, this can be demonstrated through discussion of another 'emotional zone', of joy and belonging, which was located by participants in the communal areas of the house. Emma commented:

the kitchen table, because this is where we had all our celebrations, we celebrated all birthdays and Christmas, Easter, we celebrated all that with a big dinner, so I really enjoyed those times and I think we all did. I think other stickers are going to get there, but just in general the living room because also as soon as we had guests, John's kids like as soon as we got guests everybody was being in the living room together. Sometimes just watching a movie or something, but it was always a place where we would all meet and when Anne [service user], she spends a lot of time in her room by herself, but sometimes she just, especially after winter, in winter she did not really feel good, and she would cry a lot in her room, and when it got better she started, after more than one year living in the home, she started coming downstairs to the living room, just to sit with us.

Here the same participant describes the communal areas of the house as a place which generates shared emotional experiences of joy and belonging, centred on the table and the living area. The advantage of the layering effect of the mapping task can be seen here, as these experiences appear to contradict the first set; close community is negative, intrusive in the first set of data, and positive here. The mapping task can hold these contradictions, as participants are asked to describe multiple experiences happening within the space of the home, including contrasting emotional experiences. By its nature, therefore, this task draws out multiplicity and complexity, specifically locating experiences and allowing both participant and researcher to draw out patterns without being reductive. The layers of meaning and experience explored through the map-building exercise can hence help to explore the 'messiness of social life' (Wetherell, 2012: 19). Through the use of the map, participant and researcher are able to build up multiple layers of specifically located, sometimes apparently contradictory, experiences to produce a complex and nuanced picture of experience.

### **Using participatory mapping in psychology**

This chapter has explored some possibilities and pitfalls of using map making as part of qualitative psychological research. We have argued that maps can help to locate and situate experiences in participants' narratives, and act as evolving objects, both process and product, in the research process. We have argued above that map making as a process has inherent fluidity, able to be adjusted, expanded, erased or started again during the interview process. By the end of the interview, however, the map is also a product, a shared visual record of the shared meaning-making process in the interview, which is then available for both researcher and participant. One participant in the mental health study, Joyce, commented, upon finishing her map: 'It's good this isn't it, because you can see it all together and if you've missed anything out'. Map making can thus be seen as one of many ways to empower participants during the research process, a fundamental principle of much qualitative research. We see this tool as sitting within a broader tradition of trying to do research 'with, not to' people, of a broadly participatory approach to psychological

research. A shared product at the end of a research encounter – whether a map, drawing or other object – can help towards mitigating some of the power differentials within research (Reavey, 2011).

For qualitative researchers in psychology, these methodologies can also offer a route for exploring the grounded contexts of experiences. The examples explored in this c clearly demonstrate ways in which psychological experiences are located and embodied, as well as situated in culture and meaning (Burkitt, 2014; Cromby, 2015; Wetherell, 2012). In these studies, drawing maps helped participants to bring together the affective, material, symbolic and representational facets of their experiences, through a creative process of joint meaning making with the researchers.

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# TOWARDS A VISUAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION

## Photographing the self, weaving the family in a multicultural British community

*Caroline Howarth and Shose Kessi*

Social psychology has long recognised the role of the visual in the development of identity, representations of others and prejudice (Forrester, 2000; Frith, Riley, Archer, & Gleeson, 2005; Reavey & Johnson, 2017). The images that others have of us impact on identity as we develop a sense *and a vision* of self. The images and so representations that others have of us sometimes affirm or jar with our own image of who we are (Howarth, 2002). Research within the social representations tradition (Moscovici, 1998), for example, demonstrates the ways in which representations produce, extend, threaten and sometimes transform different social identities (see Moloney & Walker, 2007, for a useful edited collection). Yet, methodologically, there are few empirical studies that practically explore the *actual* production of self-images or the contestation of stigmatising representations of particular communities.<sup>1</sup> As Forrester (2000) has commented, ‘it is a little surprising that photography has rarely been used in psychology either as a basis for analysing cultural conceptions of the self-display, or as a methodological tool in research exploring the relationship between self-concept and presentation’ (p. 168). In this chapter I examine one community-based arts project that does precisely this: it uses art (photography, painting and weaving) as a medium to examine the images that people hold of themselves and explore how far these correspond to and contest others’ sometimes negative images of them.

Traditionally social psychology uses interviews, focus groups or surveys to capture people's sense of themselves and feelings about social stereotypes that relate to them. For example, in my first study on identity, I examined how young people living in Brixton (a suburb of London) felt about the different social stereotypes of Brixton (or social representations of Brixton). In the main, I used semi-structured interviews and focus groups to access how people related to Brixton, how far they developed a 'Brixtonite' identity or distanced themselves from the often racialised and negative representations of the area (Howarth, 2002). These standard methods served the study well and revealed important aspects of the participants' struggle for identity.

However, in this first study, I also analysed a television documentary series about people from Brixton and ran focus groups exploring the images produced in the series and how these could be interpreted by viewers in general. Following Gillespie (1995), I wanted to reveal the 'mediated messages, through the eyes of her informants themselves' (p. 1) and so I asked the focus group participants to consider both the encoding and the decoding of the programme (Hall, 1997). In many ways, the media programme and related focus groups went to the heart of the issue – the very *visual* significance of representations of Brixton, something taken-for-granted and simultaneously avoided as too sensitive or political to discuss. This was the racialisation of people from Brixton, the psychological politics of this and people's collaborative efforts to reconstrue negative representations of Brixton in more positive ways. Hence the visual methods led to an important finding: *identity is both restricted by and liberated by its very visibility*. (Ironically it was harder to publish this work as psychology journals did not accept images at the time. More recently, however, a number of journals are including images, albeit with restrictions on the visual content, such as limitations on nudity and facial recognition.) This early study drew me to visual methods generally, which developed into a commitment to explore the visual politics of identity and the value of using visual methods in psychological research.

### **Using visual methods to explore identity**

In this research project I collaborated with Fusion, a Black and mixed-parentage family group. With funding from the Arts Council, Fusion set up workshops to provide a context for children and young people to explore mixed heritage, assert positive cultural identities and develop skills to protect themselves in racist encounters. Together we drew on both social psychology, to facilitate a clear understanding of the connections between identity, representation and prejudice, and art – as a means of bringing somewhat abstract concepts to life – such as the gaze, self-image, social representation, narrative and performativity. As other researchers have found (e.g. Banks, 2007; Clark-Ibáñez, 2007; Boonzaier & Kessi, 2018 In Press), we discovered that visual methods were an ideal methodology to engage young people, to build rapport and disrupt the power dynamics of much social research. The workshops provided an ideal context to explore the value and limitations of visual methodologies as a means of examining the (co)production of



identities, the diverse nature of identity (i.e. hybridity) and the ways in which identities are acted out or performed (i.e. performativity).

Following an ethnographic approach (Rose, 1982), I worked very much in the capacity of a participant-observer, recording as much data as possible while assisting the children and, where appropriate, participating myself. Each workshop ran over four days in two different groups: 7–10-year-old children and 11–19-year-old teenagers.<sup>2</sup> Experienced artists ran each workshop, with support from Fusion's art education officer and myself. The artists were highly skilled in using art as a means of subverting common stereotypes, encouraging rich narrative and promoting self-reflection. As a whole, the workshops aimed to promote the expression of secure cultural identities through creative and interactive activities that forged a collective sense of cultural heritage and history. We hoped to create a forum for 'community conversations' (Campbell, Nair, Maimane, & Sibiya, 2007) on identity and a space to develop the social support to overcome prejudice and racism and experiences of exclusion, rejection and hostility.

The children and teenagers in the workshops were used to being seen as 'minorities', subjected to stereotypes of otherness and often treated as the object of reifying and racialising representations. As bell hooks has argued, to be an object of reifying representations is to lose the power to represent one's self and so to lose the possibility for being recognised as one sees one's self. Creating a space to work with images of the self was important. In the photography workshop, the children and teenagers took photographs of themselves and painted over these – discussing the ways in which they saw themselves and understood others' images of them. In the weaving workshop, family groups told stories of connection, belonging and cultural identity while weaving together fabrics, wools and maps into individual, family and collective weaves. (These activities are discussed in greater detail below.) As other researchers have found, 'making and sharing photographs can be helpful in generating rapport' (Gold, 2007, p. 145), facilitating interpersonal relationships and community building (Olin, 2012) and building solidarity and self-empowerment (Kessi, 2011, 2015). I found the experience very powerful and the resulting data incredibly rich. The analysed data included the photos and the weaves, cultural artefacts brought in from home, group discussions within the workshops, recorded interviews participants made with one another and focus groups with participants (including children, teenagers and parents).

### **Interpreting images: connections between representation, identity and power**

The best way of conveying the value of visual methods for this research is to give examples that illustrate the textured connections between representation, identity and power. In Kessi and Cornell's work (2015) on representations of race in higher education, students took photographs that depicted spaces and artefacts on their university campus that represented racialising symbols of exclusion. Often, they placed themselves or other students in their photographs as a way of illustrating the link between their environment and its impact on their identities. In one

photograph, the student is blurred in relation to the campus buildings with the caption 'Out of Focus' (p. 4) to illustrate a sense of not being valued by the institutional culture of the university.

Meaning is thus assigned to photographs through interpretations that are mediated by identity and the affective experience of being located in a particular historical and political environment. I suggest that it is necessary to ground these connections in practice, otherwise research questions and findings can literally get lost in words. Visual methods have the potential to transcend language barriers and cultural conventions when researchers are 'cultural outsiders' (Malherbe, Suffla, Seedat, & Bawa, 2016). However, without words, without some verbal qualitative data, the images collected in the project would only be interpreted through my eyes. The verbal data contain individual and collective interpretations of what the weaves, paintings and photos mean and how they can be read. Combining visual methods with participatory action research such as PhotoVoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) is another powerful way of enabling participants to tell their own stories through combinations of visual and textual data, often also 'performed' orally by participants through public photography exhibitions. Hence the combined analysis of verbal and visual data gives a much richer and more complex picture of the social encounters produced in the workshops and the connections between identity, representation and power. Here I give four examples, using both visual and verbal data, which illuminate four main aspects of the research project:

1. Representations as the building blocks of identity;
2. The psychological violence of representation;
3. The creative possibilities produced in 'doing' identity;
4. The power of collaboration and collective identities.

### ***Representations as the building blocks of identity***

Social psychology demonstrates that identity is always produced in relationship and is marked by the particular context in which it is performed (Tajfel, 1978; Condor, 2006). One of the mothers made this point<sup>3</sup>:

*Lucie:* It [my identity] depends very much on the context – and how other people see me. I am aware of different parts of myself in different situations.

One of the main objectivities in designing the workshops was to produce a particular context that would facilitate a rich, multilayered discussion of identity – focusing cultural identities, cultural heritage, feelings of belonging, connection and disconnection. In both workshops this was done unobtrusively by placing artefacts, books and maps in the room – either simply as a backdrop or as tools. For example, one activity was to produce a family weave – a small weave with different colours and textures of wool to symbolise significant family members. This used a book as the frame on which to actually weave. The artist brought a diverse collection of books which appropriately reflected different cultures. These included

well-known books (such as Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* and Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*) and travel guides (for example, to West Africa, India and Hong Kong). When discussing the weave and showing it to the others, participants discussed how they ended up choosing particular books that had some connection to their own cultural histories. Indeed, I found that this was what I had done myself in choosing a text that highlights my own connection to Africa (Figure 22.1).

The workshops were managed in such a way that I could work very much as a *participant-observer* (Rose, 1982) – joining in activities, sharing the stories developed through the art projects and being very open to questions about my own childhood in Kenya and the South Pacific. Some of the other participants had also grown up in Africa or had connections to the Pacific, and this created a considerable degree of connection and warmth. Assumptions about identity, which connections were prioritised and how other people construct 'different' cultural identities quickly and easily became topics of animated discussion.

The very practical, visual and creative nature of the activity brought the role of representations as the building blocks of identity to the fore. Just as Harper (2002) has found, this methodology can 'mine deeper shafts into a different part of the human consciousness than do words-alone interviews' (p. 23), making the visual a central dimension of cultural construction (Rose, 2007). Participants chose colours and textures to identify with, physically wove these together, showed

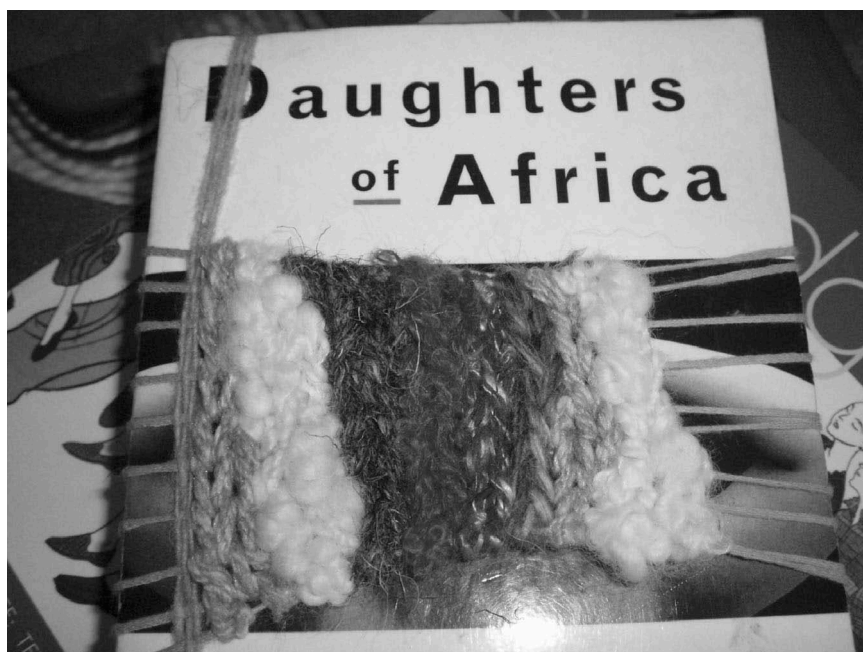


Figure 22.1 *Daughters of Africa* weave

photos and weaves to others, created narratives about what they saw in their art and in work produced by others – perhaps seeing the emerging images through others’ eyes or with new insight and emotion. The participatory nature of visual knowledge for identity construction and consciousness cannot be overstated (Seedat, Suffla, & Bawa, 2015). While focus group discussions would have revealed some of these aspects of identity, I would suggest that the importance of visibility for identity in terms of how we are seen, how we ‘capture’ the other in our gaze and how we collaborate alternative visions of both self and culture would not have been so evident without the use of visual methods.

### ***The psychological violence of representation***

Evident in both workshops was the very political consequences of visual representations of identity. That is, people, cultures, communities but especially minoritised groups are literally *captured* in a particular way by the gaze – otherness is thereby marked on to their skin, their hair, their facial features and there are certain stereotypes that flow from this act of looking (Fanon, 1952; Hall, 1997; Howarth, 2006; Erasmus, 2017). As Foucault has forcefully demonstrated, ‘visibility is a trap’ (1977, p. 200). Many of the participants gave examples of how this ‘trap’ affects them, discussing their desire to relax (straighten) hair, have smaller noses and lips, be white – or to proudly assert afros, African features and other visual markers of difference. For example, this is an extract from a discussion with the mothers of the young participants:

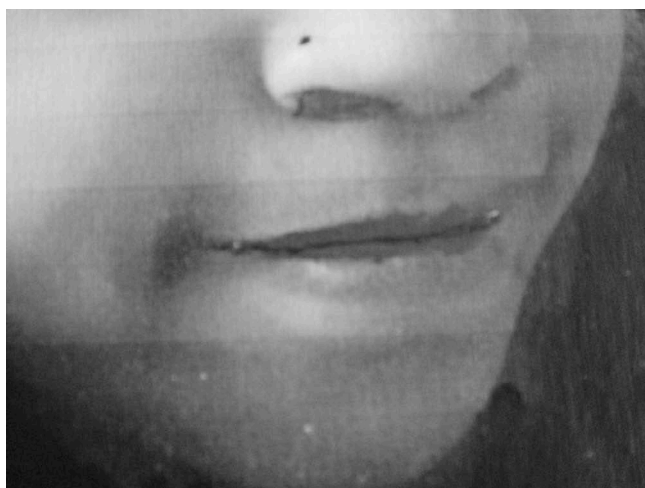
*Linda:* Because Tracey – she never wears her hair down and I’m hoping that might change, you know, as her confidence grows and her own identity, you know, her perception of her own identity. ... [When she was younger] Trace was coming home from the nursery in tears because another child wouldn’t kiss her because she thought it might be catching, and this is at three years old. And kids weren’t using the water fountain after my daughter used it. It is terrible, and some woman, ‘Oh, you’ve got hair just like my poodle’.

*Lucie:* I was one of the only three Black children in the school and immediately people’s eyes were on me and it was just – being singled out. I was very shy and I just wanted to hide, and it was somewhere near that time I remembered thinking ‘I wish I had straight hair’, ‘I wish I was white’.

In these extracts and Figure 22.2 it is possible to see the effects of the psychological violence contained in the politics of representation – as certain representations restrict the ways in which we are seen and so limit the possibilities of self (Howarth, 2002). In analysing Figure 22.2, produced by Lucie’s youngest child Jamelia, it would be an easy assumption that her daughter’s identity is in fact damaged by the same negative representations of Blackness that equate beauty with ‘white’ features such as thin lips. Let me explain how this image was produced. In the workshop the artist asked participants to photograph a part of their face that they particularly liked *or* disliked. After these were developed as black-and-white

A3-size pictures participants were invited to paint on the image and to explain the changes they made. One of the aims of this exercise was to explore how we are seen, how others see us and how we may change or challenge this. Most images were changed a great deal – participants enjoyed spending a lot of time adding various colours and patterns, as we can see in Figure 22.3 (below). By contrast Jamelia made a few very simple changes to her photo – she painted her lips bright red but also, significantly, made her lips much narrower. In colour this image is quite shocking. The red stands out dramatically against the black and white, and the narrowing of the lips is less obvious, but when seen it jars with common hopes for and Fusion’s ambitions of supporting positive and assertive cultural identities.

From the image alone it is impossible to know what this says about Jamelia’s own identity: whether she is revealing a desire to hide her Black features and therefore a certain degree of shame and a spoiled identity (Goffman, 1968), or whether she is demonstrating her knowledge of racialised stereotypes and that this in fact is a subversive attempt to challenge assumptions about beauty, femininity and ‘race’.<sup>4</sup> From the verbal data as well as discussions with her mum, it seems just as likely that she is very conscious of racialised representations and is making quiet, determined attempts to unsettle easy assumptions about her identity and what she ‘should’ be like. What this example may demonstrate is how photographs can be used to force the viewer to ‘confront their voyeurism and complicity with the colonial gaze’ (Cornell, Kessi, & Ratele, 2016, p. 113). Images produce effects (Rose, 2007) that enable the photographers to speak back to racialised and gendered stereotypes, appealing to people’s sensitivities whilst highlighting the significance of embodiment as a practice of liberation (Kessi, 2017).

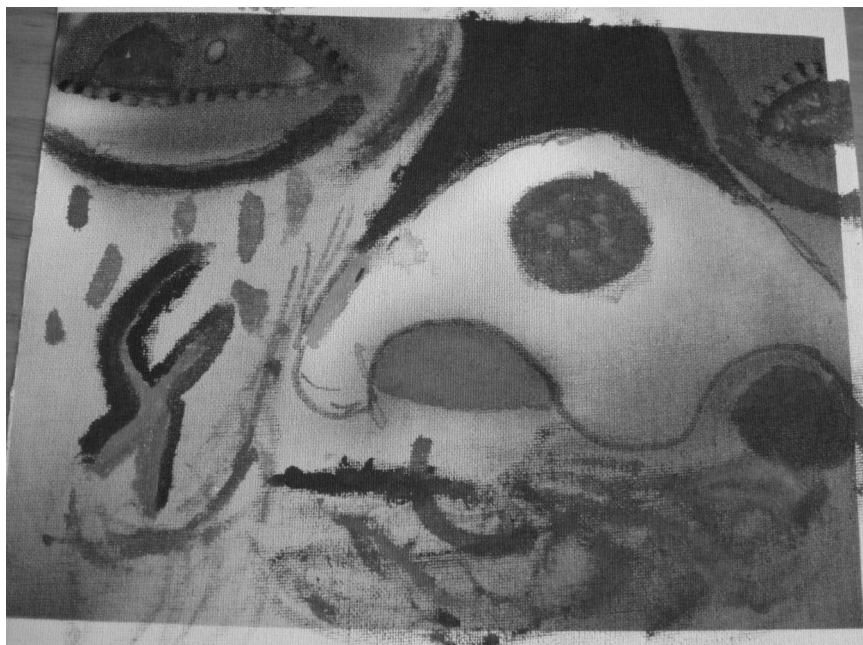


*Figure 22.2* Red lips.

***The creative possibilities produced in ‘doing’ identity***

Interestingly, the other photo that was also barely changed was of someone’s hair. When I asked the teenager who took this photo why he hadn’t painted it he simply said, ‘it’s cool like that, no need to change. ... Too many people mess with their hair. “Don’t mess with my hair!” (*in a mock angry voice*)’. Hair can be a very political issue as it may assert or contest various representations about African and Caribbean identities (Haley, 1998; Dash, 2006; Nyamjoh & Fuh, 2015). The photo itself hints to this significance and the political nature of the connections between how we are seen and how we re-assert identity. The act of taking a photo and then painting over it (or not) was very successful in highlighting the dynamic, creative and provocative aspects of ‘doing’ identity.

Figure 22.3 is another example from the photography and painting activity. Initially Akinyi was very resistant to keeping this photo at all; she said she ‘hated’ the photo and would ‘put it in the bin’. Gentle persuasion from the artist and Fusion’s arts facilitator did not change her mind, it seemed, and she worked on another image. However, she later came back to the discarded image and spent a good deal of time painting on to it what she described as African colours and textures. At the end of the four-day workshop, she admitted that she ‘really, really liked the picture’, saying ‘you can really express yourself using pictures and art’. She went on:



*Figure 22.3 My African face.*

*Akinyi:* This was an experience (*laughs*). I hated this photo – my nose! It looked so ugly. Then I thought – this is my nose, it is an African nose (*laughs*). I shouldn't feel bad about it. So I painted it in a Africany way – the colours of Africa. The hills and valleys of Africa! (*Laughs*)... I like the multicolours too. I mean, it also symbolises I like multicultural – I like living in a multicultural community. I am proud to say that I live in a multicultural community.

Through the workshop as a whole, Akinyi's attitude seemed to change a great deal. She seemed to change how she saw herself, how she dealt with others' representations and expectations of her and this increased her confidence and cultural pride. This parallels a shift from her positioning herself at the centre of her stories, to a focus on the community as a whole. She seemed much more assertive and connected to the group by the end of the workshop.

One of the other activities seemed to elicit these feelings of a new-found confidence to assert proud identities. This was a dressing-up task – where participants choose from a diverse range of clothes, wigs, hats and props that represented different cultures, generations and fashions. Hair again was a common topic – as children and teenagers choose to play with different types of wigs – making them feel 'more African', 'like a girl' and 'happy'. Olive was very enthusiastic about this task – choosing items that reflected what she 'was like before', wearing an ankle-length skirt as she used to in Tanzania but in a style that she described as 'Australian, hippy-ish and super-confident!' As she explained:

*Olive:* This gives me a picture (looking in a full-length mirror) of who I can be. Hippy-ish, confident. I used to wear skirts like this. I think this is how Australians are. I will be like this one day. (*pause*) It makes me feel liberated! (*laughs*) Yeah! Liberated! (*Makes a power-to-the-people gesture with her fist.*) Yeah, liberated.

She said this on day one of the workshop. By day four she was even more assertive about her identity and the need to stand up to racism. She told us that she now realised that she has been very much a victim of racism and she had not had the confidence to stand up to racist bullying in the past. She said that the workshops enabled her 'to express my feelings and stuff through pictures'. She repeated a story that she told earlier of extreme racism on the school bus, racist chants and jokes told literally on a daily basis. She shared with us that she has realised she has never stood up to racists or asked anyone to help her deal with this. While she recognised this would be very daunting, she seemed to feel much less victimised by the situation, realising she has a choice in how to respond.

### ***The power of collaboration and collective identities***

What the analysis above fails to highlight is the very collaborated nature of the workshops, the art produced and the narratives told. Many of the participants commented on the value of having 'a space to stop and think about our cultures',

as the mothers said, ‘a forum’ where they could ‘see each other’s stories’, appreciate differences in cultural experiences and find commonalities in identity work. Two of the participants talked about what they liked about the workshops:

*Karen:* The workshops helped me think about myself, and where I am from. It made me want to learn more, about where I am from. It made me understand myself more – which helps. I liked thinking about what my culture is – the smell of mangoes, West Indian food and the heat! It is hot. And also my English culture – like was grey skies really! (*laughs*) Because the more I understand myself, the easier it is when I have to deal with racism, the better I deal with it the more I know about myself. Because I feel strong, you know, about who I am.

*Susannah:* I liked finding connections with other people. Like she said she thought of the smell of mangoes – so did I! So we both chose the same colours (*in the collective weave*).

Building networks and collaborations has been noted elsewhere as instrumental in producing alternative and more positive visual representations of the lives of those who are marginalised (Kessi, 2011). Sharing common stories of the experience of racism develops solidarity as opposed to victim blaming. This is a complex task in settings where competition for resources is high, often manifested through suspicion and other forms of relational violence. Nevertheless, it is the shared identities constructed through a project and the aspirations derived therein that constitute the drivers of resistance and change.

All of the parents and older participants in the photography workshop commented on how much they learnt from each other, especially about experiences of racism. Some of the weaving embodied the collaborative and collective aspects of cultural identities very tangibly – in the production of large collective weaves such as Figure 22.4 (approximately three feet by five feet).

Participants wove together colours and fabrics that held cultural significance for them while telling the story of these pieces to each other. In the making of these group weaves, therefore, there was a real sense of a collective narrative of identity emerging – as people found common memories of ‘home’, of food, music and smells, of parents and grandparents, of journeys to other places and connections to Britain. As well as telling these stories to each other, families were also sharing stories, as one of the mothers said:

*Lucie:* it reminded me of stories you hear about people who are working and making quilts or weaving in Africa. Not necessarily singing, but working and talking and telling stories and passing around stories from centuries ago. It’s something about telling your story to your children that keeps it alive.

Everyone in the workshops was in some way ‘mixed’ – and so, for a change, people enjoyed ‘being part of the majority’, as another mother said. Being in a minority was a more common experience for the children; one parent said that in her children’s school of about 550 children there are only six non-white children.





Figure 22.4 A collective weave.

Like many of the other parents, she was passionate about the need for organisations like Fusion where they not only learnt about cultural identity and mixed heritage but they also learn how to deal with negative stereotypes and racism. As she said:

*Nancy:* They've got to be able to stand up [for themselves]. That's what I want for them.

The very practical aspects of the methods invited the participants to work together, share difficult stories of prejudice and hostility and find ways of supporting each other. This made the workshops feel very empowering and invited both individual and collective forms of agency to develop, as other visual researchers have also found in their use of visual methods (e.g. Clark-Ibáñez, 2007; Banks, 2007; Seedat, Suffla, & Bawa, 2015).

### **Towards a visual social psychology of identity and representation**

The contextual and relational dynamic of identity has been at the heart of social psychological theories on self and identity from Mead's influential lectures on the

self and society, Goffman's conceptualisation of the performative self, Tajfel's early studies of social identity and Turner's emphasis of the situation-specific nature of identity, and is also highlighted in powerful critiques of the field (e.g. Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Reicher, 2004) and explicit in more recent, innovative work on identity and prejudice (e.g. Ahmed, 2000; Condor, 2006; Phoenix, 2006). Despite these weighty intellectual traditions, homogenising and reifying versions of identity and 'race' still penetrate the field (Stevens, 2003; Howarth, 2008). I hope that the research described here highlights the potential of visual methods for developing a social psychology of identity and representation that instead examines the creativity, collaboration and criticality involved in the telling and performing of cultural identities. This is what I hope I have addressed in this chapter: the importance of visibility for identity and the value of a methodology that brings to the fore the ways in which we see ourselves, are seen by others and the psychological politics that this provokes. Through a visual approach to the psychology of identity we can see how identity is both restricted and liberated by its very visibility.

People's sense of self, their fluid, dynamic and collaborated sense of connection and disconnection (to many different social groups and communities) and the negotiated limits to the production of identity, is something that is often intensely visual. Being British, being white or Asian, being old, being female, having mixed heritage – these are all aspects of ourselves that are seen, displayed and created. The visual aspect of identity at once highlights the conditional politics of the gaze (we cannot often avoid being *seen* in very particular ways – as brown or white or 'mixed') and the psychological politics of resistance (there are so many ways of asserting/performing/challenging what it is to be *seen* as brown or white or mixed). While this is undeniable in racialised contexts – as we impose 'race' in the very act of looking, I would argue that visual methods are relevant for looking at all aspects of identity – most importantly, the relational and restricted aspects of identity (how identity is literally captured in social relationships with others) and the creative aspects of identity (how we challenge, resist and re-create how others literally see us).

The workshops described here used the visual to great effect to bring out these tensions between representation and identity, highlight stigmatised assumptions and invite collaborative narratives of positive cultural identities. To summarise, we have seen how:

1. creative photography can capture the gaze of the other and the symbolic violence of racism as well as the possibilities for recasting the self in the eyes of others;
2. weaving together different threads and fabrics that resonate with cultural associations and social memories can produce shared images and narratives of connection and disconnection, belonging and exclusion.

One of the participants described identity as 'an unfinished project – a work in progress' and this was very evident in the workshops as a whole. Different activities explicitly and implicitly asked the participants to consider how others view them,

expect them to be and so impact on their identities. Marcus Banks (2007) has argued that ‘the act of looking produces knowledge that in turn constitutes society’ (p. 42). The activities worked with this principle, and found ways to encourage the participants to challenge the ways they were often looked at, to challenge the knowledge so produced and thereby to challenge the racialisation of society. For example, the act of taking a photo or producing a weave, consciously reflecting on it and debating this with others somehow seems to unsettle negative representations of identity and ‘race’. Similarly, photographs of the self as ‘out of focus’ (Kessi & Cornell, 2015) place the Black body at the centre of this challenge, the body itself acting as the object of the racial gaze as well as the site of resistance and liberation. Hence the visual methods used here portray how *identity is both restricted by and liberated by its very visibility*.

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### Notes

- 1 The main exceptions to this come from photo-elicitation studies (see Stanczak, 2007, for a good collection from sociology) and social psychological analyses of images of ‘others’ in a discursive or social representations tradition (e.g. Moloney, 2007). Such studies have been criticised as they ‘may be limited by the researcher’s interests’ and so miss what is meaningful to the participants (Clark-Ibáñez, 2007, p. 167). Rarely do studies look at the actual production of images themselves, as we do here, directed by the research participants and produced in collaboration with researchers.
- 2 As the focus in the weaving workshop was on family heritage, one or two main carers participated alongside their children.
- 3 All names and some personal details (such as nationalities) have been changed in order to protect the identities of the participants.
- 4 ‘Race’ is problematised with speech marks in order to disrupt its taken-for-granted and often naturalised status in both everyday and academic discourses. This emphasises the socially constructed nature of ‘race’.

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## 23

# ‘I DIDN’T KNOW THAT I COULD FEEL THIS RELAXED IN MY BODY’

Using visual methods to research  
bisexual people’s embodied experiences  
of subjectivity and space

*Helen Bowes-Catton, Meg-John Barker and Christina Richards*

### **Introduction**

A great deal of the qualitative research on bisexuality published in the last two decades has used discourse analysis to explore bisexual people’s articulations of identity. These studies, which began to emerge around the turn of the 21st century, and focus particularly on bisexual women, demonstrate the difficulties of articulating a coherent bisexual subject position in a gay/straight world. Participants in these studies vehemently reject binary categories of sex, gender and sexuality, and argue that they experience their identities as coherent and unified. Nevertheless, stymied by a lack of discursive resources, they have no option but to describe their sexualities in terms of these binaries (Ault, 1996; Barker, Bowes-Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy, & Brewer, 2008; Berenson, 2002; Bower, Gurevich, & Mathieson, 2002; Bowes-Catton & Hayfield, 2015; Gurevich, Bower, Mathieson, & Dhayanandhan, 2007; Hemmings, 2002).

To take up a bisexual subject position, these studies show, is to reject binaries at the same time as reifying them, and to reject bounded notions of sexual identity while pragmatically embracing them (Bower et al., 2002, p. 47). It is to be ‘everyone and no-one’ (Hayfield, 2011), ‘everywhere and nowhere’ (Petford, 2003), to be both ‘fractured’ (Ault, 1996) and ‘whole’ (Bowes-Catton, 2007). Such ‘structurally fractured’ articulations of identity (Ault, 1996) of course reinforce popular conceptions of bisexuals as confused or undecided about their sexual identities (Bowes-Catton, 2018, in prep).

In designing this research, following the ‘turn to the body’ and the ‘turn to experience’ in sociological and psychological research (Reavey, 2011; Stam, 1998), we sought to develop a methodological approach that would allow participants to ‘say something new’ about their identities (Gauntlett, 2007). It seemed to us that the traditional discourse-focused approaches we and our colleagues had hitherto adopted made it difficult for participants to articulate identities outside of the prevailing binary paradigm, and obscured experiential and material aspects of sexual identity such as embodied experience and performativity. In this research, therefore, we sought to move towards an understanding of bisexual subjectivities as not only constructed through discourse, but also grounded in the bodily practices and spatialised performances of lived experience. To facilitate this, we applied visual and creative methods of data production such as modelling and photography, with the aim of understanding the experience and production of bisexual subjectivities, both in everyday life and in bisexual spaces such as BiCon, an annual bi community gathering in the UK.

### **The research context**

As noted above, qualitative research on bisexuality has often focused on the ways in which bisexual people and communities construct their identities through language. Generally, such work has involved collecting data through interviews, focus group discussions or existing sources such as bi community materials and bi activist texts, and subjecting these to some form of discourse analysis. Researchers have been particularly interested in the ways in which bisexual people and groups construct and present their identities within a linguistic and cultural context that sees sexuality and gender as dichotomous (gay or straight) and leaves little discursive space for bisexuality (Barker & Langdridge, 2008).

Bisexuality is commonly understood to refer to sexual attraction to more than one gender (The Bisexual Index, 2015), but these studies consistently find that many bisexual people express deep ambivalence about the term ‘bisexuality’ itself, arguing that it reinforces the idea that sexuality is dichotomous (Bower et al., 2002, p. 31).

Petford (2003), for example, described the preferred definition of bisexuality within the bi communities she studied as ‘mutable sexual and emotional attraction to people of any sex, where gender may not be a defining factor’ (p. 6). Similarly, Berenson (2002, p.13) noted that, for her participants, bisexuality was less about ‘the inclusion of both men and women in the realm of their possible attractions’ than it was concerned with ‘a refusal to exclude’. Despite such explicit rejection of dichotomies, however, these studies find that discourses of bisexual identity, rather than moving beyond binary definitions of sexuality altogether, frequently construct discursive space for bisexuality either by positioning it as the ‘natural’ human sexuality (upon which bogus and divisive binaries have regrettably been imposed), or by recasting the binary in terms of bisexuals and monosexuals, or queers and non-queers, thus establishing bisexuality as one-half of a new sexual dichotomy.

(See, for example, Ault, 1996, p. 180; Bower et al., 2002, p. 37; Bowes-Catton, 2007, p. 64; Hemmings, 2002, p. 29.)

Notwithstanding these attempts to rework dominant understandings of sexuality in ways that leave space for bisexuality, such studies also demonstrate how very difficult it is for bi people to talk about their sexuality without making reference to the polarities of gay/straight and male/female. While bi people's identity talk often involves the explicit repudiation of these categories, the constraints of discourse mean that it is almost impossible to describe one's sexual subjectivity without making reference to them, resulting in 'structurally fractured identities' (Ault, 1996, p. 173).

The findings of these studies were supported by our own discursive research on bi identities, conducted as a discussion workshop at a bisexual community event in the UK (Barker et al., 2008). At the beginning of the discussion, participants unanimously rejected dichotomies of sexuality and dismissed gender as 'irrelevant'. For example, one participant stated:

When I was slowly realizing that I was bi, the first thing was 'I fancy women', then it was 'I don't think actually gender is that relevant' ... it's about as important as something like eye colour.

Another said that being bisexual meant that:

your desires and your attractions can wax and wane as time goes on. I realized that there was a parallel to gender as well: you don't have to clearly define, you don't have to cast off the male to be female and vice versa.

Later in the discussion, however, participants drew on dichotomies of gender when talking about their own experiences of bisexuality. For example, one said: 'I'm finding myself looking at women more. I've got one [man] and so I don't need any more', and another noted that their sexual practices varied with gender: 'I'm pretty much sub[missive] to blokes and top [more dominant] to women'.

Similarly, participants recounted experiences of being attracted to different features in male or female partners, whilst, at the same time, several expressed discomfort with their habitual attempts to discern a person's gender on meeting them.

Discourse analytic research into bisexual identity, then, consistently shows that binaries of sexuality and gender are simultaneously rejected and re-inscribed in accounts of bi subjectivity, which are 'inescapably marked' by the very binary structures of sexuality they seek to undermine, resulting in indistinct and fragmented articulations of identity (Ault, 1996, p. 173). Despite this, however, bi people vehemently stress the wholeness and coherence of their identities (Bowes-Catton, 2007, p. 64).

Faced with this contradiction, we began to speculate that our participants were struggling to articulate coherent identities, not because they experienced their identities as fragmented, but because the structural constraints of discourse forced



them to locate their accounts of sexual subjectivity within the very binary paradigm they so vehemently rejected. This led us to investigate visual and creative methodologies for studying bisexuality, and other sexual and gender identities, which we hoped would allow people to talk in new ways about the experience of sexual subjectivity.

In doing this, our interdisciplinary research follows the wider challenging of the privileging of language in qualitative research, and the 'turn to the body' within sociology and critical psychology (Reavey, 2011; Stam, 1998). This involves recognizing that people's lived and felt experiences of the social world take place in embodied material and spatial contexts, and viewing the body not just as a surface that can be inscribed with meaning, but approaching the study of the social world from an embodied perspective. From this perspective, power relations are not just transmitted through discourse, but through the 'dispositions, bodily habits, emotions, and senses that run through the process of thinking and action' (L. A. Del Busso & Reavey, 2013a). Embodied experience is situated in what Del Busso and Reavey call 'socio-spatial contexts, which can facilitate or restrict embodied expression' and our work therefore also draws on feminist and queer cultural geography (Bell, 2006; Valentine & Skelton, 2003) as well as on theories of the everyday (Highmore, 2002). We agree with Reavey and Johnson (2008) that eliciting visual materials from participants offers one possible way into incorporating such embodied experiences and awareness of socio-spatial contexts.

Perhaps most significantly we draw on the work of the cultural geographer Clare Hemmings (2002), whose landmark book *Bisexual Spaces* was the first to explicitly address bi spatialities, and has therefore deeply influenced later work in this area (see, for example, Bowes-Catton, 2007; Maliepaard, 2015), although she does not attend particularly to the embodied experience of individuals within such spaces.

By using visual methodologies in the study of bisexual identity, then, we hoped to overcome some of the limitations of previous discursive work in this area. We also found that visual methods fit well within the tradition of feminist participatory research (Hesse-Biber, 2012) in which our work is located.

There is of course nothing inherently empowering in the use of visual methods – as with any research method, it is necessary to recognise the ways in which issues of power are inevitably present (Luttrell & Chalfen, 2010; Packard, 2008). However they seem to us to offer the potential for enabling participants, especially those, like bisexuals, who are often marginalized or silenced (Barker & Langdridge, 2008), to gain a voice in research to a much greater extent than traditional positivist methods do (O'Neill & Hubbard, 2010), and in a different way than that offered by traditional qualitative interviewing.

For example, Reavey (see Chapter 1, this volume) suggests that the use of the visual allows people to show researchers their experiences and their lived spaces rather than simply to describe them. As queer feminist researchers, we are also committed to producing research that comes from within communities, rather than being imposed upon them (Hagger-Johnson, Hegarty, Barker, & Richards, 2013). Visual methods seem ideal for work on bisexuality conducted from this standpoint,

because they fit in well with the kinds of activities already being run at bi community events, which often involve the use of art, poetry, music, games and drama to explore issues of relevance to the community. Community events such as BiCon, the annual UK gathering for bisexuals, also prompt many attendees to create their own artefacts and ephemera such as mix CDs for the disco, badges covered with various stickers and colours to represent different aspects of identity, photographic records of the event, costumes for the Saturday-night ball and memory posts on blog sites. Thus, creative means of identity exploration were familiar to participants within this context.

The incorporation of a visual research project into BiCon 2008, the event where the present studies were conducted, was timely because the organizers had asked two of us (Meg-John and Christina) to extend the usual event with an extra day on the beginning focusing on disseminating and developing research on bisexuality (Barker, Richards, Jones, & Monro, 2011). This was the culmination of several years of explicit engagement between bi communities and academic researchers which also involved an annual survey of BiCon attendees, workshops and an email discussion group for those interested in helping with research (mostly coordinated by ourselves). Many attendees arrived early in 2008 in order to attend BiReCon, and it formed an opportunity for the lead researcher on the current study (Helen) to run an initial visual methods workshop and to inform attendees about previous research in this area.

### **Research aims**

The aim of this research was to explore the ways in which visual methods of data elicitation can facilitate access to experiential data about embodied experiences in space, rather than purely discursive accounts about identity, producing rich data about the lived, sensorial experience of being bisexual, rather than the accounts of 'structurally fractured' identities discussed above.

### **Methods**

Bisexual space is not just hard to come by in discursive terms, but also in literal ones. Specifically bi spaces in the UK are few and far between. There are a small number of bi social/support/activism groups around the country, and a couple of regular pub/club nights, but there is not a commercial bi scene in the way that there is a commercial lesbian and gay scene. Bi spaces tend to be temporary, and when they do occur, they draw people from a wide area. Occasional regional events such as the BiFests held in Brighton, Manchester and London draw people from all over the UK. The main event of the organized UK bisexual calendar is BiCon, an annual long weekend of workshops and socializing that has taken place somewhere in the UK almost every year since 1982. In recent years it has tended to take place on a university campus in July or August, usually with onsite accommodation.

According to the annual questionnaire data between 200 and 300 people attend BiCon each year, 85–90 per cent of whom identify as bisexual, and the rest are made up of allies and other minority group members. Ages range from 17 to 61, but most attendees are over 30 and under 50 (Barker *et al.*, 2008; Bowes-Catton, 2015). In many ways the attendees of BiCon can be seen as ‘the usual suspects’ of LGBT communities, with middle-class and white people enormously over-represented – 99 per cent of those surveyed in 2008 were white, while 67 per cent had at least one degree. Two-thirds (67 per cent) of those who completed the survey at BiCon in 2008 identified as female, and just over a quarter (27 per cent) as male, around 5 per cent identifying as genderqueer, androgynous or agender.

Fifty-two per cent identified as having significant mental or physical health impairments affecting their daily lives. According to official statistics, 16 per cent of people in the UK have limiting long-term illnesses, and 7.5 per cent are classed as ‘disabled’, so people with health impairments seem to be well represented at BiCon. This may be explained by the strong commitment to access within BiCon constitution and organizing committees, though our broad definition of ‘health impairments’ should also be taken into account here. The context in which the current research was conducted was therefore overwhelmingly white and middle-class, but with diversity in terms of disability and gender identification.

The research conducted at BiCon 2008 was in two parts. For the first study, 11 volunteer participants were asked to take photographs of their embodied experiences of BiCon, and to make notes on the experiences and feelings that had prompted the photographs. They also completed a similar photo-diary of their embodied experiences of a week in their everyday lives, following Alison Rooke’s similar studies of lesbian experience (see Ryan-Flood & Rooke, 2009). They were interviewed about both these diaries between September and December 2008. During the interviews, participants were also asked to draw sketch-maps of the BiCon venue and talk about their experience of the space.

For the second study, the lead researcher (Helen) ran three workshops at BiCon 2008 itself in which participants were asked to make and discuss models of their experiences of BiCon using Lego, Plasticine and other craft materials. This modelling work drew on and developed David Gauntlett’s (2007) application of Lego Serious Play modelling methods to the study of identity, in which he found that giving people the time to reflect on their experiences and make models representing them enabled them to ‘present a set of ideas all in one go’ (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006), and allowed them to articulate clearly things that are usually difficult to express verbally or appear contradictory, thus avoiding some of the problems of discursive research.

Various scholars have outlined methodologies for the analysis of visual materials produced during the research process (see, for example, Banks, 2001; Gauntlett, 2007; Gillies *et al.*, 2005; Radley & Taylor, 2003). In this study, however, photographs were used as aids to memory and prompts for discussion, rather than as objects for analysis in themselves (Bagnoli, 2009). While the contents of the photographs are of interest, we followed Radley and Taylor in ‘attempting to

understand what has been made visible and why' (2003, p.79), rather than being interested in the meanings of images alone. Ultimately, therefore, this study relies on the analysis of discourse – photos and modelling were used as tools to elicit a different kind of discourse than that routinely produced in qualitative research interviews – namely, rich descriptions of the embodied, material and spatial experiences that had prompted the creation of the visual artefacts.

In this way, we sought to move towards a multi-modal form of data collection which would allow participants to capture and reflect on particular moments of embodied experience, and to engage more fully with multiple modalities of experience than a traditional interview or discussion would allow.

The data was analysed using a critical hermeneutic phenomenological approach based on Langdridge's (2007) approach, which allows the analyst to apply both a hermeneutics of description and a hermeneutics of suspicion to the data (drawing on Ricoeur, 1970). The intention in this kind of analysis is to move iteratively in a hermeneutic circle, moving between segments of the transcript and the transcript as a whole; between hermeneutics of description and suspicion; and between the viewpoints of the researcher and the participant (with the latter being foregrounded, and the former 'bracketed off' as far as possible) (Langdridge, 2007; Van Manen, 1990). This approach allows for both an empathetic engagement with lived experience, and a critical analysis of the way that narratives of embodied experience are located within power dynamics. The analyses below thus aimed to present a sense of the participants' lived experience whilst relating it to wider issues of embodiment and socio-spatial context.

## **Analysis**

One of the most striking features of the data was a recurring description of bisexual spaces as places where participants felt that they could breathe differently. This theme first emerged in a pilot workshop for the study. The title of this chapter is drawn from a comment made by a participant in this workshop, who was attending a bi community event for the first time. Figure 23.1 shows the sculpture that she produced about her experience of this bisexual space, and her subsequent description of it:

Um, well I did a two-sided collage sculpture and um, I guess this side, um, I picked out a lot of pictures of water and sky and birds and sort of this expanse of feeling which I was just feeling when I was out on the deck (laughs) and just thinking to myself, my God, I have this whole afternoon to be myself, and I can just be bisexual, and it just felt so amazing and I'd never felt that before and it was just like, wow, I didn't know that I could feel this relaxed in my body, and I actually do, because I go around on my bike with my muscles and my body very contracted all the time, and it just felt like these spaces opening up within my muscles and just like, air, and opening up the spaces, yeah, it just was an incred- (outbreath/sigh) yhaaaaaaa, it feels good, you know. So I wanted to express that.

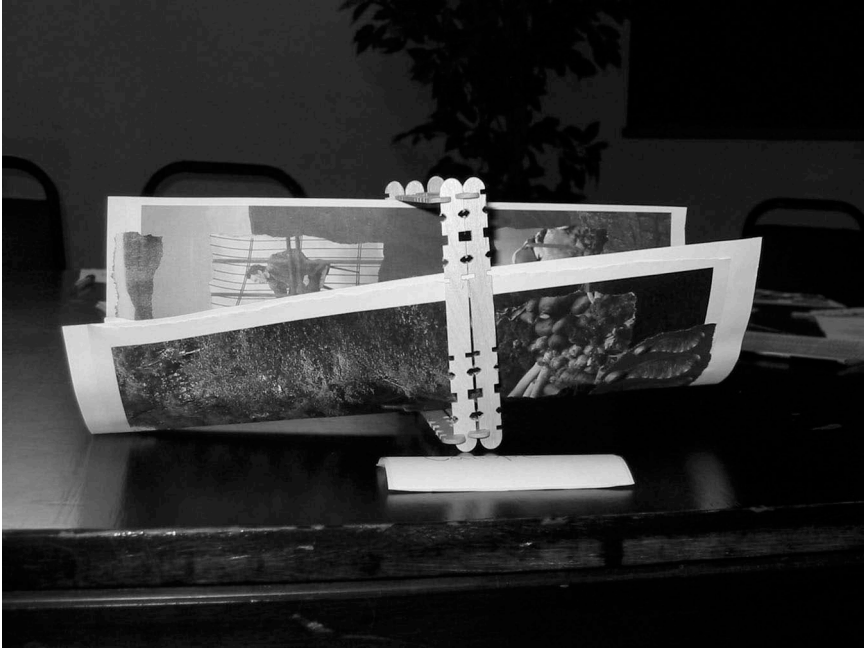


Figure 23.1 Participant sculpture.

This embodied sense of bi space as an airy place where you can relax bodily, breathe out and ‘just be bisexual’ was a dominant theme in both studies. From a phenomenological perspective, these participants appear to be describing a sense of interpenetration by the world, an overcoming of Cartesian dualistic splits to experience themselves as body-subjects rather than body-objects (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). In this extract, the participant describes how, in bi space, her body felt physically more open and spacious inside, than in everyday life. She experienced an ‘expanse of feeling’, seemingly expanding out of herself into the space and feeling part of it, the boundary between the world and her body becoming less distinct. This is analogous with the accounts of participants in Del Busso’s research (Del Busso & Reavey, 2013b; see Del Busso in Chapter 4, this volume) who experienced bodily subjectivity when their bodies were in motion, rather than trapped in the gaze of another.

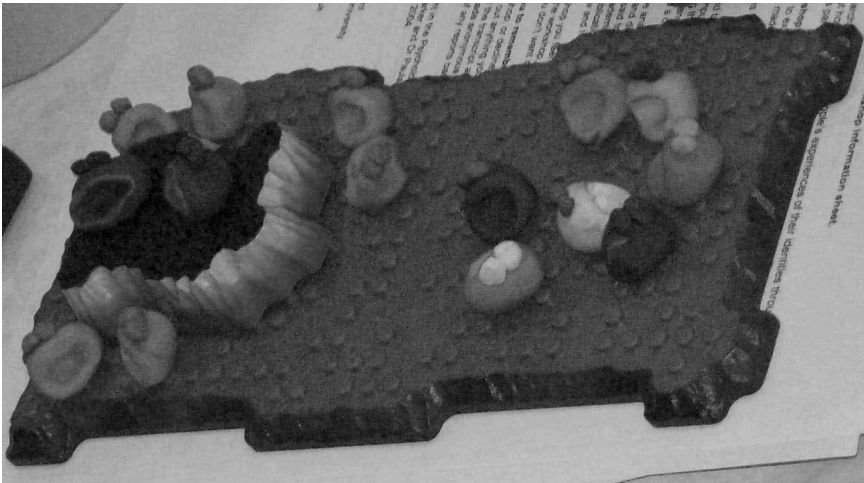
Just as Del Busso’s participants found liberation from constraining discourses of desirable femininity in movement, so this participant reports that, in a bisexual space, she experienced a sensation of liberation from her usual experience of ‘go[ing] round on [her] bike with [her] muscles and [her] body very contracted all the time’, where there is a clearer separation between her body and the world.

### *Visual methods and the bisexual experience*

It is notable that the participants in the initial workshop in which this participant was involved were actually not asked to produce models of their experience of bi space, but of experiences of home. It was anticipated that participants would produce collages depicting their actual homes, but, while many did, many also produced models reflecting their experience of bi community space as home, either by itself or in addition to models showing their experiences of their households.

In her analysis of the 1990 National Bisexual Conference in the USA, Clare Hemmings talks about how the conference was explicitly conceived as a 'homecoming' for bisexual people, as a safe refuge from a biphobic outside world (2002: 169). Referring to the sense of 'bisexual home' invoked here, Hemmings notes that, in this sense, 'home is not simply geographical, but a site of meaning within which one both recognizes oneself and is recognised in return' (2002: 169).

Related to this, the data from several of the interviews and some of the workshops suggests that BiCon is indeed a space in which one is 'recognized', and that bisexuality itself is therefore actually less salient at BiCon than in everyday life. As several participants noted, BiCon is a space where bisexuality is the normative centre and everyone is assumed to be either bisexual or bi-friendly. Indeed it was notable that data collected in the later discussions (where participants were asked to model their experience of being at BiCon) was rarely explicitly about bisexuality. Several participants remarked that they noticed bisexuality more in their everyday lives where it was not 'the norm'. This is illustrated in the model (Figure 23.2) and accompanying description below:



*Figure 23.2* Participant model.

Erm well. When I'm in, not at BiCon you feel like um, you feel like, kind of like, you are bisexual. And you're kinda like separated from everyone else because they think you're weird or something. And they've got the bi colours on the little people. Erm there's like a few bi people I know but it's kind of a thing of everyone else just thinks you're strange and stuff. But when I'm at BiCon there's loads of different people. And but we don't care we just get on and we like feel normal and stuff. And we don't feel like anything.

Hemmings (2002: 172) describes how at the US bisexual conference she studied constructed bisexual group unity through reference to its own internal diversity, positioning difference as the core of bisexual identity. It is interesting how the participant above similarly and explicitly refers to there being 'loads of different people' in bi space: people who despite (or perhaps because of) their differences from one another, 'just get on ... and feel normal', whereas in the outside world 'you're separated from everyone else'. The result is that in bi space 'we don't feel like anything', and bi identity is less marked than in everyday life.

Many participants in the photo diary study took pictures on their way to BiCon, and talked about bi space, this 'bisexual home', as a place outside daily life, which had to be literally journeyed to. In Figure 23.3 and the excerpt below, this sense of bi space as a place apart from daily life is continued.

This is the same train station that I go to em, erm, my partner's, one, and then, yeah so it gives always a lovely sort of feeling of, this is my station where I get away to bi loveliness and yeah, I just thought, that just was part of BiCon, being there. And also just the space, and the nice airiness, the freedom, it kind of just reinforced being free, being able to be self-determined. So yeah, that's why I took these three.

[Interviewer: And-that kind of openness, is that about the station, or about...?]

Well I'm usually reasonably open, I'm, I said before I'm out at work, which is great, and I try not to sort of like squash bits of meself nowadays, though I know I did very much in the past, but erm I just think I could just re-emphasize, I could just sort of breathe out and there was just all this space and I didn't have to squash meself in or double life there or and it just felt freeing and liberating.

Here, we see 'bi loveliness' as something the participant feels that she 'get[s] away to', separate from everyday life. In describing the experience of being on the train to BiCon later, the same participant describes the experience of 'speeding through the countryside untouched by everyday life'. The railway station is a liminal space



*Figure 23.3* Photo-diary photograph.

that's full of people coming and going, and this fits Hemmings' (2002) description of the bi conference space she studied as a 'space with no actual place', without borders or constituents. The participant above experiences this airy space as a space of possibility and self-determination.

Bisexual space is also presented as a place where, even if one is 'out' in daily life, you can 'breathe out' and not be 'squash[ed]' or 'contracted'. The sense of expansion and airiness referred to in the first extract is evident in this account too, and again seems to point to the embodied experience of bi space as involving the dissolution of boundaries between subject and object, self and world (Matthews, 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 2005).

This sense of being free to be oneself in bi space without experiencing oneself as separate from (Figure 23.4) and at odds with the world is also found in the following participant's description of her model:





Figure 23.4 Participant model.

I have a sort of the four elements in the middle here. I don't know what they really are but that's what they are for me. Because BiCon feels like five bazillion pagan festivals I've been to and so like Stella I don't have a sense of '*I'm in bi mode now*' but I'm just in me mode and I can let all those closet doors open. So I can be bi and poly and pagan and into BDSM [bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism] and whatever and like it's just I can just be me. I can just breathe and that's what the tree is. It's that breathing deep down to the bottom. Where I don't get to do that during the normal days.

Like this participant, several people in the research referred to having multiple minority identities, and this is reflected in the earlier questionnaire data (Barker et al, 2008), which found that many participants identified with minority genders (e.g. trans, genderqueer), religions (particularly forms of paganism), subcultures (e.g. goth, naturism) and relationship or sexual communities (e.g. polyamory, sadomasochism). The participants in the current study largely saw BiCon as a space where these were recognized and accepted. The identities referred to by this participant are generally reflected in the programmes of BiCons where workshops cover interests such as kink (a flogging workshop), polyamory (workshop on time management and non-monogamy) and spirituality (morning meditation sessions). As well as reiterating the previously discussed sense of BiCon being a space to

breathe, this participant also spoke of BiCon as a space where she could be ‘all of me’ and could ‘let all those closet doors open’, tying this back to her experience of her own sexuality.

A fuller exposition of our findings falls outside the scope of this chapter,<sup>1</sup> but we believe that the data presented here demonstrates that participants in these studies described bisexual space as physically and experientially separate from the spaces of their everyday lives. Bi space was constructed/experienced as a ‘home’ space where bisexuality and diversity are normalized or taken as read, where bisexuality itself may be less salient, and where there is a sense of interpenetration between the embodied self and the wider world. As we will outline below, we believe that our use of visual artefact production helped participants to attend to and describe their spatialized experiences of bisexual subjectivity.

## **Discussion**

In this section, we will compare our use of visual and creative methods in workshop-based research on bisexual subjectivity to our earlier use of discussion-based sessions, arguing that visual methods have several important advantages over traditional methods, and discussing some of the issues that need to be considered when using visual methods in this context.

The most compelling advantage of using visual methods to research bisexual subjectivity is their potential for disrupting the rehearsal of dominant discourses of bi identity, which result in the reiteration of the ‘structurally fractured’ identity narratives discussed above. The preliminary data presented here suggests that visual and creative methods can be used to elicit rich data about lived experiences of bisexual subjectivities that circumvent the rehearsal of these narratives.

We would argue that this is in part because, as Gauntlett (2007) has pointed out, visual methods give participants time to think before answering a question. Semi-structured interviews, in particular, demand a fairly instant response from participants (within the conventions of conversation). Focus group discussions make it difficult for participants to think because other people are talking (and, likely, influencing their own response). Even with written questionnaires, the convention is to respond immediately, rather than to take time considering answers. With visual methods, the process of creating a model, drawing or set of photographs gives participants time (from 15 minutes to several days) to think about their experiences without much influence from anyone else, and to produce and describe artefacts that enable them ‘to present a set of ideas all in one go’ (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006) rather than being constrained by the linear modality of speech.

We also found that there was much less attempt at ‘consensus building’ in modelling workshops than in discussion-based sessions. As we outlined above, in discussion-based research workshops on bisexuality, participants are likely to introduce dominant notions that ‘love counts more than gender’ (Barker *et al.*, 2008), or that bisexuality means equal attraction to ‘both’ genders (see Barker *et al.*, 2008), and then trouble these notions to some extent. However, participants would then quickly move on to trying to find commonalities between their experiences,

as if the accepted purpose of such discussions were to come to agreements and/or to define universal rules. However, this was not the case in the workshops using visual methods. One of the accepted conventions of artistic creation is that it is about self-expression and individuality, and in collage and modelling workshops there seemed to be a tacit acceptance that the objects created might all be different. This opened up the possibility that the experiences or identities expressed in the subsequent discussion might also all be different and that there might well be inconsistencies and contradictions between and within people's stories. Participants often pointed out similarities between their creations and those presented by other people, but it seemed just as common for people to speak up in order to point out how different their creations were. The discussion following this then seemed to flow naturally into drawing out multiple ways of experiencing bisexual identity, some of which were shared between some members of the group and some of which were unique. The methods of modelling and collage allowed people to articulate their own experiences and have them affirmed without people feeling the need to link into their own stories or offer advice, as often happens in conversation.

We have argued thus far that the usefulness of conventional discourse-based approaches to research is limited by the constraints that language places upon participants, and have also noted that participants' understandings of how to 'do' group discussion shaped the data we gathered. Whilst our discussion group participants struggled to coherently articulate their identities in response to interview questions, they were able, when given time and engaged in a creative process, to present a complex and sometimes contradictory set of ideas simultaneously and coherently (Gauntlett, 2007). Visual methods, then, in our experience, are helpful in producing data that overcomes these constraints and meets the phenomenological aims of eliciting rich descriptions of lived experience and multiple meanings, rather than universal understandings (Langdridge, 2007).

If visual methodologies remove one set of constraints from data elicitation, however, they add another, and in this final section we briefly outline some issues for consideration when using visual and creative methods in fieldwork.

A key concern in designing our methodology was to minimize the impression that participants were required to produce 'something arty'. We therefore selected methods of artefact production that we hoped would avoid participants feeling constrained by concerns about artistic merit. In a pilot workshop for this project, we provided participants with collage materials, but some participants commented that they had found it difficult to engage with the 'artiness' of the creative process:

I think it's probably fine for artistic people but I find it very hard to express myself artistically.

*(Pilot workshop participant)*

Using Lego was particularly helpful in addressing this, as participants did not seem to share the same anxieties about their ability to model in Lego as they did about

their abilities to make a model in Plasticine (whose free-form nature felt too much like 'sculpture' to some), or to produce a collage. For most participants, the Lego and Plasticine-based workshops seemed to be less intimidating and more accessible than the collage-based workshops, with fewer expressions of anxiety about not being 'arty', and more positive comments about enjoying fun, playful elements of the workshop.

In both the modelling-based workshops and the collage-based pilot project, we found that providing participants with some materials which they could use to structure their creations (such as the pre-made Lego figures, pictures from catalogues and magazines, and other craft materials such as glitter and lollipop sticks) helped to mitigate fears about being 'artistic', and lent a sense of playfulness to the workshop which encouraged people to be experimental and creative (Gauntlett, 2007: 134). Nevertheless, we found that, even with a medium such as Lego, participants seemed to share common understandings of how Lego should be used, such as that blocks should be fitted together, and that like colours should be contiguous. Some participants also commented that, even with this method, they still found themselves worrying about being artistic, or competing to produce the 'best' model:

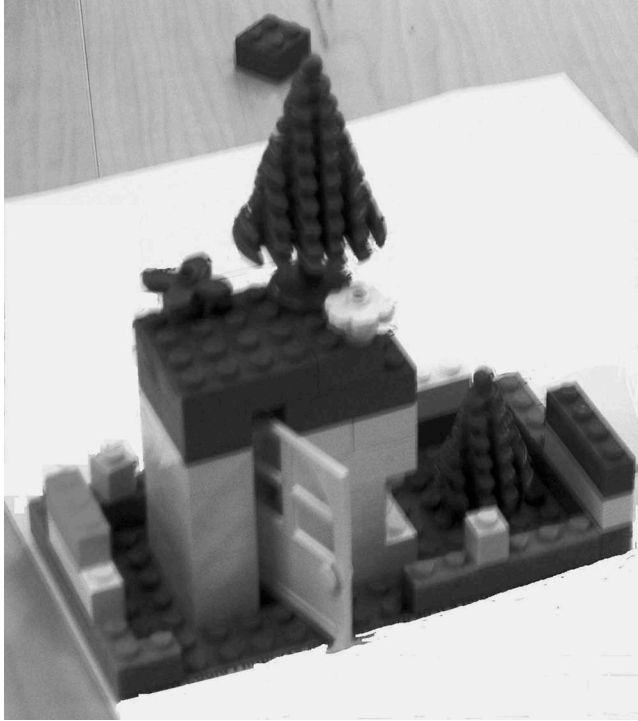
I liked the Lego. Um, (.) I was feeling really, I was feeling a bit self-conscious, because even though I knew, it was one of those things, even though I knew the point of the Lego was that people worry less about being artistically able, even so, I was feeling competitive and worried about my artistic ability in front of the group. I was thinking, 'this is stupid, just get on with the bloody Lego', but it was no, I had to be best at the Lego! And yeah, yeah, I was kind of chuckling at my own inability to (.) um, face the fact I might be slightly crap at something even if it was just Lego, but.

*(Interview participant)*

Finally, we found that it was important to be clear with participants about the status and purpose of visual products within the research, and to counter received understandings of the diagnostic role of images in psychological research. We found that our participants sometimes assumed that we were interested in analysing the visual materials they produced in order to discover something about their inner worlds, and were careful to point out inappropriate inferences they felt the models might suggest to us. For example, the participant who made the model in Figure 23.5 wrote on the workshop feedback form:

The house would have had an inside and an outside and windows and solid walls with more time – the slightly unfinished bit isn't a reflection of mental state.

Being careful to be clear with participants about the status of visual products within our research (as techniques to give people a chance to reflect upon their experiences and speak about them in new ways, rather than as diagnostic tools or artistic endeavours) also had the effect of helping participants to feel more relaxed about producing 'imperfect' visual products.



*Figure 23.5* Participant's Lego model.

## **Conclusions**

Preliminary analysis of the data presented here suggests that participants in these studies experienced bi space as physically and experientially separate from their everyday lives. Bi space is constructed/experienced as a 'home' space where bisexuality and diversity are normalised or taken as read, where bisexuality itself may be less salient and where there is a sense of interpenetration between the embodied self and the wider world.

The current research found that experience of bi spaces was construed, by participants, in terms of a sense of 'home', where bisexuality and diversity are taken as read, and where embodied selves are experienced and interconnected with the wider world. Bi spaces were physically and experientially separate from participants' everyday lives in which, paradoxically, bi identities were felt as more salient.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Note

- 1 For a fuller analysis and discussion of the results of this research, see (Bowes-Catton, 2016, 2020) (under review).

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## 24

# TRAVELLING ALONG 'RIVERS OF EXPERIENCE'

## Personal construct psychology and visual metaphors in research

*Alex Iantaffi*

### **Seeking embodied knowledge and swimming along a river of questions**

In 1995, I officially became a researcher and an academic. I had just received a studentship to undertake a PhD at the University of Reading, focusing on issues related to social justice in education, and I was faced with a vast sea of dilemmas. I knew that I wanted to research the experiences of disabled women students in higher education, but I also knew I had to face two major challenges: what to focus on exactly and how to carry out this study. The latter was the beginning of a continuing journey into, and fascination with, the landscape of research methodologies. Once I decided that my focus would be on the identities, both collective and individual, of women experiencing a wide range of disabilities (physical, sensory, intellectual), then I knew that verbal methods alone would not be sufficient to explore this topic within the theoretical framework that was emerging for my work. Indeed I felt strongly that many of those experiences might not be readily available through language to the participants since their stories had, at that time, mostly remained invisible and untouched (Blackwell-Stratton et al., 1988; Cornwall, 1995; Potts & Price, 1995). During the piloting phase, this was confirmed by the type of written narrative that I received by participants. All the narratives focused on the medical stories (e.g. listing limitations and physical accommodations needed to access classes) that affected their lives as students and which were rattled off with practised ease. Other issues, such as what those experiences meant to them and how they might be shaping their sense of self, remained largely unarticulated and yet just present enough, beneath the surface, such as follow-up conversations, to spur me on.

Several of my methodological, epistemological and research questions started to become entwined. For example, how could I talk about issues of disability and gender with my participants without imposing my own preconceptions, that is my own experiences and understanding of gender or what it means to be a student in higher education? Which theories best reflected my own belief in research as a collaboration, yet acknowledged the power differential between my position as a researcher and PhD student and the position of my participants? What methodological approach would enable me to move back enough for the participants' stories to emerge and how could I pursue further what those stories meant to them, in their own words? How would, or even could, I define disability in a non-pathologising way, if I truly wanted to avoid the pitfalls of the medical model?

I wanted to explore their own journeys, which had led them to become students in higher education at the moment of the interview, and to observe whether and how disability and gender came into play, if at all. The idea of using the research process as exploration of those topics, not just for me but for the participants themselves, started to emerge. I wanted a participatory model of research that was in line with some of the radical feminist thinking of the time, which rejected 'grand theories', which tried to explain the world (Stanley & Wise, 1993) and rather sought to understand the world (McCarthy, 1996) and even more so individual people in it. The latter approach moves away from the more traditional approach to research, which may seek to uncover universal patterns, and towards a model of research that values context-specific knowledge, promoting a more in-depth understanding of specific issues and leaving readers to decide how such findings may or may not apply to their own context.

Such an approach to research also challenged the dichotomy between theory and practice and I became fascinated by the idea of praxis, that is, the application of theory to a particular task, in this case research, as a way to synthesise different epistemological and methodological approaches for a purpose (Siraj-Blatchford, 1994). What I was after was embodied knowledge because that was the site of my participant experiences of both disability and gender. By embodied knowledge I mean the lived experiences of their lives, which unfold in a dialogical and relational manner, rather than being crystallised in time or place (Shotter, 1997). As such this type of knowledge is also an outcome of the relationship between researcher and participant as it emerges from the joint reflection on a topic of interest to the former and the life of the latter. It seemed to me that uncovering this embodied knowledge also required new tools, which could tap into those constructs that had not yet been verbalised.

Initially I thought I would use metaphors, because of the rich, often visual landscape they could offer and then realised that I needed another step before reaching the more crystallised verbal image, which could be captured in a metaphor. This step would be one that would allow me to co-create shared meaning with my participants and, in doing so, to see them as co-researchers in this process, albeit temporarily (Fromm, 1992). This is also the step, and the tool, that I seek to share in this chapter: the river of experience. I developed the latter

over the years as both a research and a teaching tool. However, before I can go on to explain more fully what this tool is and how it works, I need to ask you to travel a little further with me along the current to frame this tool within the theoretical framework from which it was born, that is: personal construct psychology (PCP).

### **Big ideas from a small (theoretical) island: a whistlestop tour of PCP**

After exploring various theoretical and methodological approaches to qualitative research, I realised that I wanted a framework that allowed me to enter into a dialogical relationship with my participants, so that I could meet them ‘on the intersubjective level, which makes understanding possible’ (Habermas, 1974: 11) and that also allowed a non-verbal exploration of issues that may not have previously been talked about by the participants. At the time, my ‘working theory’ was born from the firm belief that each one of us, throughout our lives, generates theories from our beliefs, experiences, attitudes and other facets of our being. These theories are usually a mixture of original, individual traits and social, collective ones, and we use them to make sense of the world and of ourselves. I soon found that my working theory was well reflected in PCP, a theory that seems to have a loyal, if somewhat small, following of clinicians, researchers, educators, health and business professionals and academics dispersed across the globe. Since the tool here described was developed within this framework, it seems opportune to provide a brief tour of this approach to understanding people.

The theory of personal constructs, more commonly known as PCP, was elaborated by George Kelly (1955) and offers tools that can be used to dialogue with other people on a one-to-one basis, interacting in a way which could be meaningful and enriching for both them and the researcher. PCP, in fact, sees other people’s constructs as their way of making sense of the world around them, and of themselves, and does not view some constructs as superior to, or better than, others. Science, in this context, does not hold the monopoly on valid thinking, and not even on itself, since ‘every man [sic] is, in his own particular way, a scientist’ (Kelly, 1955: 5). Although developed within a clinical framework, Kelly’s approach is extremely flexible and highly suitable for researching various fields, because of its open approach and recognition of the personal dimension of construing ourselves and the world.

As Salmon noted, ‘personal construct theory, grounded as it is in ordinary human experience, seems to represent that rare thing – “nothing so practical as a good theory”’ (Salmon, 1988: 13), since it not only includes an understanding of how people may operate in the world, but also how this understanding can be uncovered both in clinical and research settings, through tools such as the repertory grid or laddering up/down interviews. It is also a theory that leaves room for other theories as well, since it strives to understand the person as a whole. For example, some writers in the field have connected PCP to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body (1962) as well as Bateson’s ideas on systems (1972).

'Human experience' can be seen as the heart of PCP and it is through exploring people's own constructs that the PCP practitioner strives to achieve an understanding, rather than an explanation, of it. Construct systems, that is, the collections of experiences, ideas and beliefs that may be organised around a central theme (e.g. what it is like to be a student in an English university), are what each one of us uses to understand, learn, make choices and ultimately organise our lives around. Constructs are the complex combination of our beliefs, attitudes, experiences, feelings, thoughts and decisions and, as such, the spectacles through which we look at ourselves, others and the world. Our systems are not static, but change continuously through life and the experience of living and interacting with both our inner and outer worlds. Those systems do not exist in isolation, but in relation to other people's systems, which allows room for social and political analysis of construct systems within PCP, as Bannister (2003) has clearly shown in his writing and life. One of the most appealing and possibly political statements made by Kelly, in my opinion, is that we do not need to be victims of our biographies (Kelly, 1955: 21–2). This is because, within PCP, we construe our own identities and interpretation of events and, therefore, we have agency over our own construct systems and, therefore, beliefs and identities.

Within Kelly's framework, we are given the freedom to change ourselves, our understanding of and beliefs about other people and the world, without having to necessarily be who we are expected to be. To the young academic that I was in the mid-1990s, this most certainly seemed an emancipatory approach to research praxis, where the researcher and the participants can work together to negotiate not solely meaning, but also change, by claiming the ability to live consciously and having agency on an individual level, which in turns affects the collective level. Change is, of course, never simple, but the hope of its possibility is often a vital part of our enthusiasm towards life, and therefore essential and central to any existence.

The appeal of PCP lay, for me, in the promise of that possibility, the freedom to become our most authentic selves and to see that as a constantly evolving process of change and creativity. The reflexive aspect of the theory was also another strength that attracted me to this theory. The contemplation of, and reflection on, myself, and the contemplation and reflections of others can, in this framework, be seen as valid research as we attempt to construe and re-construe ourselves and others, reclaiming our stories as part of a wider web of meaning. It is by travelling along those currents, on such a wider web, that I came across the methodological tool of the 'snake', which then became the 'river of experience'. If, in fact, we understand constructs to be more than mere verbal labels but rather complex representations of our inner worlds, then verbal language can be limiting for both researcher and participant when trying to reach a common understanding of the topic explored. PCP offered more than methods based on linguistic interactions as it encompassed other ways of representing our inner worlds, such as drawing, which, for example, was used extensively by Ravenette (2003) in his work with children. As such, PCP offered me the opportunity to widen my

methodological repertoire as a young PhD student and realise the possibilities of exploring people's constructs visually as well as verbally.

### **Wading through many waters: exploring the rivers of experience**

A belief that guided me as a researcher early on in my journey is that we can never truly know our participants and their worlds but only their perceptions of it, filtered through our understanding. This is, in my opinion, also the case for observations, since even then all that we can truly know is the meaning that we give to that which it is being observed. Nevertheless, as researchers using qualitative methods, we can create spaces between ourselves and our participants, where, through dialogue and reflection, we can inhabit a shared portion of our worlds, at least during our fieldwork and sometimes beyond, if we involve our participants in the latter parts of our studies, such as data interpretation. This process creates what we call data as well as, hopefully, shared meaning. The latter then enables the participants to have a more authentic voice in the findings that are usually presented by the researcher(s) alone. The challenge, however, is how we can create shared meaning and explore the participants' worlds of experience without constraining them within a path so narrow that we, as researchers, might miss what we were not planning or expecting to find. For example, if I had chosen an entirely verbal form of interviewing, I might have missed the significance of early experiences of schooling on my participants' current experiences of higher education. Instead, by asking them to draw their river from any point they chose in their lives, I realised how many participants started from a significant experience in elementary schooling.

As well as choosing a more visually guided interview method, I also chose to ask only two questions (What led you to become a student in higher education? Could you draw, or describe, an image that sums up your experience of being a disabled woman student in higher education?). Starting from the first question, I asked the participants to not answer it verbally but rather to reflect on it whilst drawing a river, which I would then use as a map for our interview, a river of experience so to speak. The river of experience is a different name developed for an expansion of the 'snake technique'. The latter was first used, within a constructivist context, as a research tool for exploring participants' career stories by Denicolo and Pope (1990: 158–9). The snake technique is described in the following quotation.

They [the participants] were asked to reflect in private, visualising and drawing their lives as a winding snake in which each 'twist' in its body represented a change in direction of, or intention for, their career. Brief annotations were to be included, for each twist, about the experience or incident which precipitated the change. No instruction was given about when in their lives to start considering whether experiences influenced career.

*(Denicolo and Pope, 1990: 158–9)*

This tool, created just for a specific research study, revealed itself to be a powerful way of inviting people to connect threads of their stories and weave them together in their own way, using their own words. Over time, the analogy of a river of life or river of experience started to be preferred by Denicolo, Pope and their doctoral students, including myself. Rivers of experience started to take a range of different directions and to be used in a variety of contexts.

Personally, I chose to describe this technique as a river of experience because the imagery lent itself to a richer metaphor. To begin with, I would ask participants to think of their life as a river and to imagine each bend in the river to be a significant moment, person or object (e.g. a book or film) that had an impact on how they came to be a student in higher education. At this point I also reassured them that the scope of the drawing was not to be 'artistic' and that they could make it as simple or as complex as they wished. In the case of one participant, who was physically unable to draw, I asked her to describe the river to me and gave her the option to have me draw it or to describe the picture created in her head in as much detail as possible.

By using the metaphor of the river, I could also invite them to reflect in their drawings not just the main flow of the river but also what tributaries there might be, what currents may be present in different parts of their river and where any confluences may be. Further, participants would be able to imagine their own particular river, which might have waterfalls, rapids and all sorts of features deemed to be relevant to the participants' stories. Although the drawings tended to be fairly simple, as can be seen in Figures 24.1 and 24.2, the descriptions that the participants used during the interview provided a far richer visual imagery, bringing their sketches to life. For example, they might describe how they navigated particular bends in the river, whether they felt they were 'swimming along' or were 'swept along' or were 'cruising' comfortably.

Asking the participants to start from a simple question (What led you to become a student in higher education?) and imagine their life as a river enabled me to create a far more unstructured, yet clearly mapped, dialogue with each participant – something that, I believe, I could not have done through a traditional, purely verbal interview. First of all, it allowed the participant to start at any chronological point, as well as to set the pace and the extent of the dialogue. In turn this gave me the opportunity to elicit each participant's individual constructs whilst also looking out for common milestones, such as the use of terminology similar to that of other participants. I could then delve deeper into both individual and collective meanings by asking follow-up questions, once the participants had given me a 'verbal tour' of their drawings. In those interviews, the rivers became the shared space that the participant and I could inhabit during the research dialogue. In one case, when a participant's mobility restrictions did not allow her to draw the river herself, this sharing became literal, as she asked me to draw the river for her, whilst she talked me through it. This, and similar experiences, also showed me that this technique can be effective beyond the physical ability to draw, since it allows participants to create a visual landscape and, with it, wider possibilities, regardless of whether such landscape is captured on paper or not.

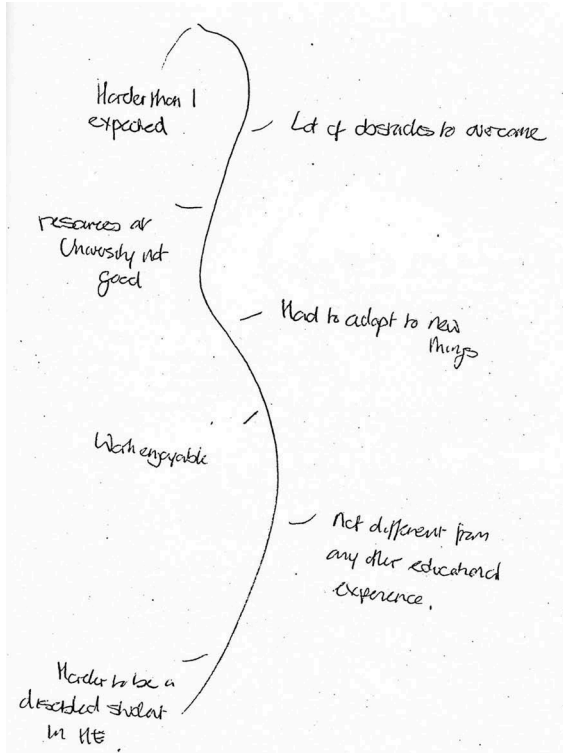


Figure 24.1 Example of river of experience – participant K.

Following my PhD, I realised that the metaphor of the river could be explored even further. What kind of river were the participants thinking of? How did it connect to the larger landscape around them? This could be seen as the wider context of their individual lives or their individual lives in relation to a social context. Where were they in relation to the river described? Swimming, drowning, walking alongside it, washing themselves in it, navigating its waters in a canoe, sailing or speeding along in a motorboat? What kind of relationship did they have with the stories chosen for each bend of the river?

I also realised that I could ask them to reflect those questions in their drawings, rather than just asking those questions verbally, leading to far richer visual metaphors than were possible in my first, simple use of this technique. This seemed to be important, as, even when the participant chose just one word to describe a particular point in the river, there was usually another story unfolding around each curve, between one point and the next.

Furthermore, the imagery of the river provided the opportunity to look at stories as journeys. Participants then had the choice to think of their lives, or

Travelling along 'rivers of experience'

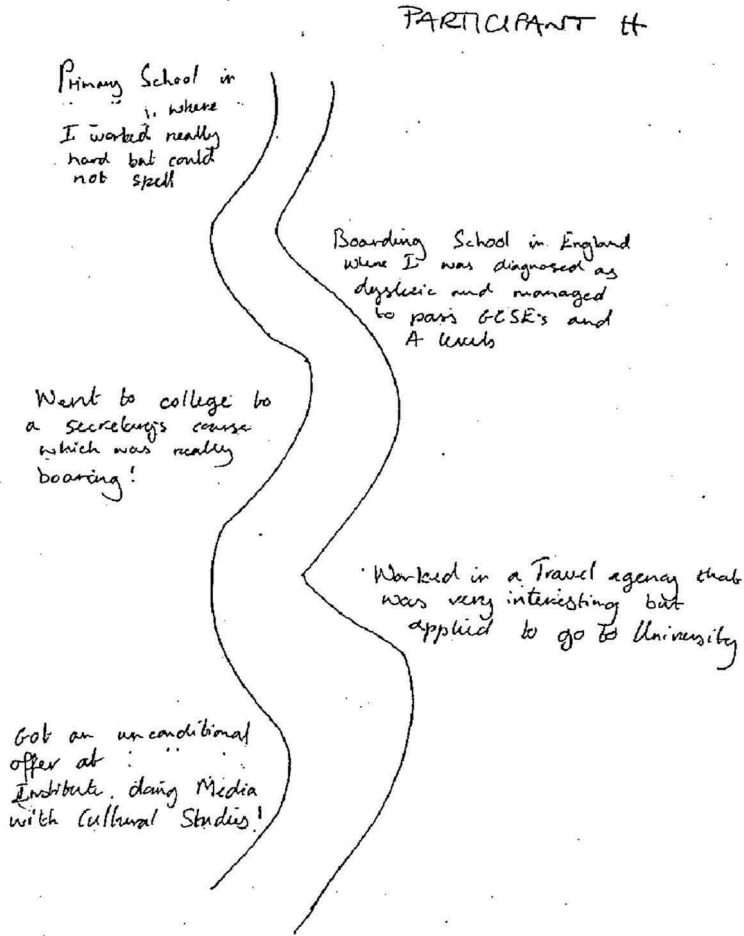


Figure 24.2 Example of river of experience – participant H.

portion of their lives, as rivers of experience along which they travel. The metaphor of the journey opened further opportunities to explore constructs over periods of time and in a variety of contexts. This meant that neither the participants nor I had to believe that the stories we shared were the whole picture or even a static one. Research dialogues could indeed be a process of which written findings are but a snapshot and the process itself could be made transparent by describing it, creating yet another shared space, this time between participants, researcher and readers.

One of the concerns I had when I first started using this technique was that I wanted it to be accessible for as many people as possible, particularly as I was



exploring the experiences of disabled women students in higher education. I soon realised that, as already stated earlier, the rivers could be highly flexible. I could describe to participants what I wanted of them, that is to think about their lives as a river of experience, and then offer a variety of possibilities. I could draw their river under their guidance, they could draw their own river, or they could simply think about what their river would be like and talk me through it. I always do this with all participants, as I want to make sure nobody feels pressured into an activity with which they are not comfortable, for whatever reason.

In another project, on peer doctoral supervision, I asked participants to prepare their river of experience before having a constructivist interview with them. At times, I have also used the technique after the first interview, in order to provide an opportunity to reflect on the stories told before further phases of the study. The most important message I like to give participants is that this is but a tool to facilitate a participant-led reflection on aspects of their lives.

The fact that this technique requires little input, beyond mere explanation on the part of the researcher, can be, for some researchers, slightly disconcerting at first, especially if they have previously experienced more researcher-led approaches. However, in my own research, participants have often commented positively on the use of this tool, as can be seen from the following quotes from my PhD research (Iantaffi, 1999):

It [the river of experience] was quite interesting, it really made you think about how the whole idea about the route to higher education. I thought it was an interesting idea, to explore rather than, bang, now you're here.

I think when I thought about it at first I thought, Oh help, but when I thought about it more deeply and then I started writing about things, these thoughts came up.

Of course, some of the characteristics of this tool, which can be seen as advantages, can also create constraints in research. The personal dimension of the rivers created by the participants does mean that the data is unique but also diverse. There are no guarantees of homogeneity across a set of data elicited from a variety of participants. They could all come up with individual, unique constructs, which is something that needs to be considered at the onset of a project. The singularity of the rivers and the stories being told by participants in their own way, using their own words, rather than being prompted by the researcher, contribute to creating a tool for research that is participatory and compatible with epistemological paradigms (e.g. feminist theory, social constructionism) that value authenticity, that is, congruence between research narratives and lived experiences, over objectivity. Nevertheless, such approaches to research entail a certain level of 'risk', particularly for new researchers who may find it challenging to explore connections, or the lack of, across a diverse data set.

Furthermore, although the river of experience has been mainly developed as a research tool, one of its purposes is to encourage a deeper understanding of an

individual's constructs and their connections. This means that this tool can be used as a means for reflection by researchers, as a teaching activity by educators seeking to encourage students' reflexivity and by clinicians in therapeutic settings. Within a research context, since this method can entail surprising and sensitive revelations for the participants, as well as the researcher, this technique should always be used with care and attention. Researchers should tread carefully, ensuring that they are not manoeuvring participants to reveal more than they are comfortable with. It is also important to have a plan for further support available to participants, should it be necessary (e.g. local organisations, helplines, further reading).

Before moving on to briefly describing how the rivers can also be used as a teaching and clinical tool, I'd like to say a few words on the relationship between the river of experience and the wider context within which it was developed, that is, PCP. This tool privileges the position of the participant as co-researcher and therefore the idea of the person as scientist, as well as highlighting the nature of knowledge as being constructed by individuals within a social network of relationships. It is also based on the premise, stated earlier, that research is an enterprise of co-construction between researcher(s) and participant(s): the river is a weaving of stories told in a particular context to a particular person for specific purposes. The latter statement implies that, in this context, experiences are seen as stories rather than undisputable, objective facts, for which only one account is possible, and that constructs evolve over time and in relation to other constructs. As such, the river of experience can be a useful tool to show research participants that transformation is always present in our stories and always a possibility in our futures.

### **Swept away from the rapids of research: rivers as teaching and clinical tools**

As highlighted in the previous section, the river of experience is a powerful technique for research but can also be used in other contexts, such as teaching and clinical work. I would like to briefly discuss its usage in such contexts before moving towards some final reflections to conclude the journey shared in this chapter. When facilitating learning around gender and sexuality, either with students in higher education or with health professionals, I have found this tool to be invaluable. For example, after introducing some definitions of gender and sexuality, I would describe the technique and ask a group to individually draw a river of experience that depicts how they have arrived to this point, here, today, with their current beliefs about their own gender (and/or sexuality). They are never asked to share their rivers with anyone else in the group, but they often share insights gained through the exercise, which is always quoted as helpful in evaluations.

I have also used the river in order to encourage students to reflect on their own learning journeys or explore what expectations they might have at the beginning of a new course. Because people are asked to draw their rivers individually, I have found this to be a useful technique with larger groups, as well as smaller groups, as

a way of engaging them on a deeper level of learning by making the issues discussed not just personal but also pertinent to their lives. I have also used the latter to highlight the influence that personal beliefs and experiences have on professional values, practices and judgements. For example, what are the stories, people and crucial events that we carry with us when, as family therapists, we work with families? Drawing rivers that reflect on what comes to mind when we think of the word 'family', and then another river reflecting on a particular family with which we work, has proven to be a rich learning experience both on an individual level and when working with colleagues.

The previous example leads me to a brief nod in the direction of the river as a tool for clinical interviews. After some years in academia, I retrained as a systemic psychotherapist and found that being a researcher was a fertile training ground for me as a budding clinician, whilst my later clinical training deepened my abilities as an academic researcher. Both in training and, later, as a licensed therapist, I have used this technique with clients. In my experience, it has proven particularly useful when a client, a couple or a family has come to me with a complex web of stories and events. I introduce them to the technique and ask them to draw a river, either during the session or at home, which stems from the question: what has led you to be here today? In the case of couples or families, they can choose to do this individually or together. For me this has proven effective in punctuating what is important for my client(s) at this particular point in time. When I just ask this question verbally, I might get a brief, and often rather vague, answer (e.g. 'it was the right time', 'someone suggested this clinic', etc.). However, when clients are asked to draw a river before discussing the answer verbally, they seem to be able to access more complex stories as well as to represent complex relations between a range of issues and to communicate layers of meaning, which verbally might take several sessions to be brought to light. From the river we can not only move to conversations about what they would like to focus on or where they would like to go next but also towards creating shared meaning within the therapeutic room.

When used with couples or families, this shared meaning is also woven amongst clients and it starts creating a web that can hopefully hold the therapeutic work to come. The river can then become a tool to be revisited, thus offering opportunities for relational reflexivity (Burnham, 2005) in the therapeutic context, that is moments in which therapists and clients can touch base on how the process of therapy is going for them or reflect on what is happening in this moment, between them. Once again, the visual representation can enable both client and therapist to access a more complex picture in a more immediate way and often to access both cognition and affect simultaneously by engaging the person in a kinaesthetic manner.

### **Ripples and reflections**

This seems an apt moment to pause and reflect about what is happening in this chapter. As an author, I hope to have navigated the choppy waters on non-linear thinking and that a picture of what a river of experience is and how it can be used has emerged for you, the reader. Before leaving you free to undertake your own

journey in the field of visual methodologies in psychology, I would like to offer some final reflections. I have now used this technique for nearly twenty-five years, in a variety of contexts, across several countries and with a diverse range of people. The way I used it as a novice academic and PhD candidate is not the way I use it now, and I believe that there is room for this tool to be developed even further. One of the conclusions that I have come to, over the years, is that, even when using a tool, such as this, which goes beyond the verbal labels that the spoken word can offer, we, as researchers, teachers or clinicians, are still a long way away from the actual experience of the people we are working with. Drawings, metaphors or any other kind of images or visual representations are still constructs that show us someone's understanding and translation of their own experience. We cannot directly access the latter or generate analysis that is devoid of our own biases and construct systems.

Every time I undertake a river of experience with someone, I am not just entering their own worlds of experience but also my own. I have written elsewhere (Iantaffi, 2006) about my belief that research is a value-laden process, 'a dialogical adventure undertaken by both researcher and participant' (op. cit.: 225), which is far from hygienic. Using rivers of experience allows me to also reflect on my own positions as a researcher, teacher and clinician by noticing not just my cognitive but my emotional reactions to someone's experience and to do so by accessing what seems to be a more visual, creative and less linear part of my brain (for further information on right/left-brain hemispheres, see MacNeilage, Rogers, & Vallortigara, 2009).

As a writer, it gives me an opportunity to share the process through which I have arrived at my conclusions to readers so that they can judge by themselves the validity and applicability of my findings. The river belongs to the person who draws it but my interpretation of it is what is shared with the larger academic community, as that individual river is juxtaposed to others and to the wider context of the research process. Nevertheless, I still believe that the river of experience can also be a tool that allows participants to access a wider vocabulary, both verbal and visual, whilst trying to convey the complexities of their lives and experiences to a researcher.

Finally, despite being a tool that appears linear, the river of experience can be used to challenge traditional, linear thinking in research, since it provides us with an opportunity to explore the participants' landscapes further and on a multiplicity of inter-related and simultaneous levels. As stated earlier, we can probe into the landscape surrounding the river, enquire about the pace of the journey, the mode of transport along the river and even delve into what is not on the page as well as the unlabelled curves from one bend to the next. Even though this tool involves drawing, the limit is not artistic skill but only the bounds of our own imagination.

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# PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY AND THE STUDY OF SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS

## Extending visual methodological research in psychology

*Alexander John Bridger*

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I will reflect upon how walking can be used as a visual method, and how experiences of walking, writing narrative accounts and creating subverted maps can all contribute to the study of subjective experience and material environments. This work extends qualitative research in psychology in arguing for what has been referred to by some researchers as a 'turn to place'. The rationale for this work is to evaluate the extent to which the situationist concepts of *détournement* and the *dérive* can be used as strategies for visual research. I will refer to empirical examples from my research at Ground Zero, New York to substantiate the claims made. The aims are not only to interpret environments as social texts and to reflect on our experiences of being in places but also more importantly to question what can often be the taken-for-granted ways in which we think about and experience the world. It is important to challenge the ways in which we would ordinarily identify or associate with our surroundings so that we can dissociate ourselves in places to imagine what environments of the future could look like. Although I, like the situationists, do not aim to map out what future environments would look like, because this is something that would be decided by the people through social action. I offer my analysis as one possible way to interpret environments, though it is important to acknowledge the plurality of ways that environments can be studied. The situationists aimed to understand social environments as texts in order to envision what non-capitalist cities would look like, although they never stated what these environments would look like. In this work I will reflect on the extent to which this is possible within psychological research.<sup>1</sup>

## Methodological resources: situationism and critical psychology

In order to understand the conditions of urban living, it is important to walk the streets and study public spaces as political spaces (Bridger et al., 2019; Hayes, 2003; Richardson, 2015). Our experiences of walking in places can be documented not only with talk and text (for example, narrative accounts, poems and songs) but also with ‘paintings, maps and landscapes’ (Barnes & Duncan, 1992: 5). I draw on literature from geography (Harley, 1988a, 1988b, 1992; Thrift, 2004), critical psychology (Burnett et al., 2004; Grup de Lesbianes Feministes, 2005; Precarias a la Deriva, 2005; Rose, 1999), cultural studies (Pinder, 1996, 2000, 2005) and urban theory (Harley, 1988a, 1988b, 1992; Joyce, 2003; Sadler, 1998) to situate the basis of this research, which I will discuss in more depth in this chapter. I focus on the French section of the Situationist International from the mid to late 1950s and early 1960s because the majority of their work at that time was concerned with a spatial analysis of the emerging consumer capitalist order of things. In this project I set out to assess the usefulness of their work via the development and usage of a situationist psychological approach. During the 1950s and 1960s, the situationists questioned the assumptions of urban town planning which they argued to be based on ‘the dominant language of capitalism, rationalism, modernization, the “Puritan work ethic”, and spectacle’ (Sadler, 1998: 96). The word ‘spectacle’ refers to a concept developed by Guy Debord (1967), whereby society is viewed as a spectacle and people within society are spectators. In the society of the spectacle, spectators are supposed to be duped by the spectacle, whereas the situationists and other radically orientated thinkers are aware of other people’s oppression and they strive to find the means to completely transform everyday life (Debord, 1967; Vaneigem, 1967).

The situationists referred to a practice called psychogeography whereby they actively disorientated themselves in places to open themselves up to how they experienced and made sense of environments. The aims were to critique the capitalist gentrification of cities by walking and they documented these walks with stories and poems.

Now I will refer to how the situationist concepts of *détournement* and *dérive* can be applied to what is referred to as psychogeographical studies of environments as visual texts. *Détournement* was an important political concept for the situationists; it referred to the importance of diverting and changing the meaning of words, images and sounds (International, 1959). The situationists challenged dominant discourses of literature, art and television by replacing the dialogue in films and comic strips, writing political articles and pamphlets, creating maps and by intervening and disrupting public events. They were against the capitalist order of things and they sought to create an anti-capitalist mode of living. The situationist concept of drifting, otherwise known as the *dérive*, was applied to how they used walking as a political act. The practice of doing *dérives* was about ‘direct, effective intervention’ to create ‘new situationist ambiances’ which would lead to ‘permanent change’ (Khatib, 1958: n.p.). Debord defined the *dérive* as:

a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities and all other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is less an important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view, cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly encourage and discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.

(Debord, 1958: n.p.)

Kotanyi and Vaneigem's (1961) aims were to inspire people to question how they think and act in social spaces. Many people have been inspired by the work of the situationists, including the Manchester Area Psychogeographic and London Area Psychogeographic during the 1990s and then more recently from 2008 onwards including the 4th World Congress in Huddersfield, Wrights and Sites in Exeter, the Loiterers Resistance Movement in Manchester and the Leeds Psychogeographical Group.

Many practitioners and intellectuals have developed their own approaches to psychogeography, as documented in such texts by Coverley (2018), Ford (2011) and Richardson (2015). They have produced new techniques and practices of disorientation in order to question how environments are experienced and how these types of places are used and could be used. The situationists used *dérives* to emotionally disorientate themselves in places so that they would be more 'open' to new experiences and how places could make them feel (Debord, 1958). They also used *dérives* to investigate particular areas of cities. Debord (1958) argued that the aims of emotional disorientation and investigations of particular areas overlapped. The implications of doing *dérives* meant that the situationists could demarcate their positions as antagonistic to dominant society.

### **Situationist methods in practice**

I aimed to study Ground Zero by drawing on existing psychogeographical theory and research, by reflecting on my position in the research and by thinking about the extent to which it is possible to disassociate oneself from environments. Debord (1958) specified that the most productive *dérives* take place in groups of two or more, so individuals can cross-check their findings with others to generate objective statements. I had initially planned to do the *dérive* at Ground Zero on my own but I decided to cross-check my observations with another person. My brother reflected on his thoughts and experiences by writing in a diary.

In terms of the reflexive considerations of this research, it is important to address how the situationists utilised their reflexive approach. Although the situationists reflected upon the contemporary social conditions that shaped how the 'present'



context could be understood, they neglected to examine their own subjective responses to environments. They did not engage with how their personal standpoints would shape their understandings of social environments. This is one reason why it is necessary to mobilise autoethnography as a response to this limitation of situationism and this is useful to evidence how to advance situationist theory. I understand and deploy autoethnography to reflect on my position in the research and to use it as an observational method, observing social environments. Autoethnography is different to ethnography in that the latter method does not involve addressing the role of the researcher in the research but, rather, extends to the study of other cultures. Ellis and Bochner (2000) discuss how autoethnographic responses can be documented not just in traditional academic prose, but also through stories, poems, fiction and photographs. Furthermore, Burnett et al. (2004) undertook an ethnographical research project in London, where they used diaries and cameras to reflect on their experiences of walking. Their *dérive* account was written as a narrative account interspersed with photographs to visually represent the places visited. I draw inspiration from how they documented the *dérive* as a narrative in this work. In autoethnographic research, researchers reflect on their roles in the research as they are the only participants in the research (Ellis, 2000). A key criticism of autoethnography is that it is individualistic (Sparkes, 2000) and entails an over-indulgent reflexive position by researchers (Atkinson, 1997). However, it can be argued that, if personal responses are understood as being produced from within particular social, cultural and political contexts (Holt, 2003) and if the personal is understood as being political, then this is one way to tackle potential criticisms that autoethnography is too individualistic and over-reflective.

Having discussed the theoretical framework of the situationists and how elements of *détournement* and the *dérive* are drawn on, I will now explain how these concepts can be utilised as part of a visual qualitative method in psychology. Psychogeographical research is different to other modes of psychological research in that the aims are to develop a radical activist dimension to psychological research. Some of the current qualitative and critical psychological research has quite a docile and apathetic conceptualisation of political practice and it is one of the aims of this type of research to revive this way of thinking. It is important to revive political research in psychology by connecting it to psychogeography, situationism and Marxism. In conceptualising how I conduct psychogeographical research, I did not aim to produce formulaic criteria from which to construct the methodology.

The research aims were primarily methodological because I needed to conceptualise how I could apply principles of situationism to a visual analysis of reading places as social texts. It is important to study the impact of regeneration in towns and cities and to think about the impact on the communities that use those places. As all social relations are enmeshed within power relations, it is important to study the concept of power. I draw on the concept of subject positions from discourse analytic work (Hollway, 1989) and reconfigure this as studying how power is spatialised in places as *spatial relations of power*. Moreover, I wanted to deconstruct what maps and places can mean and to consider research as like

a situationist game or strategy, with the aims being to re-consider and re-interpret what the site of Ground Zero meant to me.

When I undertook this research as a PhD student in 2004, there was not much work in critical psychology about how to analyse social environments, although I did find relevant documents to aid me in that exploration (Burnett et al., 2004; Grup de Lesbianes Feministes, 2005; Precarias a la Deriva, 2005). I wanted to conceptualise how walking could be used as part of a research method to analyse the site of Ground Zero in New York. This particular site was chosen as the original aims of my PhD research were to deconstruct dominant mass media framings of the events of September 11th and the aftermath. I wanted to reflect critically on how words and images were used by the mass media to make sense of the events. During the research process, I became interested in the situationists and their practice of psychogeography and decided to focus the work on studying Ground Zero and how walking could be used as a qualitative method of research in psychology.

At this stage in the research it was necessary to do some preparations for how Ground Zero could be studied. I referred to a Lonely Planet guide to New York City and a Lonely Planet map. I used the book and the map to visually orientate myself at the site before visiting. This was an important activity to do beforehand because it is not possible to subvert a map or a place unless it is known what it is that needs to be subverted. I reflected on how the concepts of the *dérive* and *détournement* could be applied to the research aims. The situationists had used a map of Paris in London and so I decided to do something similar by using a map of Bangkok to 'anti-navigate' myself at Ground Zero, New York.

It was an important aim of the research to think about the different ways in which the *dérive* could be documented. I decided that I would use a notepad to reflect on my experiences of being at Ground Zero and to use photographs to remember where we had walked. At this point I anticipated that the *dérive* would be written up as a narrative account, which would be interspersed with photographs and that notes from the diary would be used to inform the autoethnographical narrative account. What I aimed to do was to draw on situationist practices such as investigating parts of cities which one would feel drawn to, to try to be 'open' to new experiences and encounters and to think about which experiences might be produced by being in particular places. What I did not want to do was to assume to be able to find the true essence or meaning of the city as this would go against the critical relativist position taken in this research.

Having conducted the *dérive*, I decided that the analysis section would be written up as a reflective autoethnographical narrative account whereby I would cite academic writings and political prose and poetry, which would support the claims made. Photographs of Ground Zero would be interspersed throughout the narrative account to visually document the places investigated but also in some cases to disorientate readers. The account would be written in the first-person past tense, similar to other autoethnographical writings (see Ellis, 2000; Ellis & Bochner,

2000). In terms of the writing style, I was particularly interested in the work of Burnett et al. (2004) which provided an example of what an 'academic' account of a *dérive* would look like, i.e. a narrative account, which served as a story of what had happened and which was interspersed with situationist theory and research.

The second part of the analysis would be represented in the form of a détourned map which would represent places investigated but would also document the disorientation during the *dérive*. One way to explore the limits of words in documenting the *dérive* could be done by constructing détourned maps. Maps represent the dominant power relations of place and are reflective of assumptions of particular political systems such as capitalism (Harley, 1988b). It was not my aim to construct a map where people could identify where they were or what they would expect to find at particular sites. The construction of this map was informed by Debord's (1958) arguments on *détournement* and the *dérive*. I wanted to use the construction of this map to reflect on my situated experiences of being at Ground Zero. The construction of these détourned maps extends Ellis and Bochner's (2000) arguments on how autoethnographic texts can also include maps.

However, having constructed a détourned map of Ground Zero based on photocopying and pasting together maps from Lonely Planet guidebooks and maps, I encountered a problem. I was not able to show the détourned map in this publication due to a copyright issue. I did contact Lonely Planet to ask if I could modify their maps and use them in published academic research in a manner similar to what they demonstrated in their *Lonely Planet Guide to Experimental Travel* (Antony & Henry, 2005) and they said that they would not license the maps for my use. The situationists produced détourned maps which were meant to contravene copyright laws but clearly, with published research, it is not fully possible to produce détourned maps which are meant to be cut and pasted plagiarised work based on original maps. However, what I have done is to draw what the détourned map looked like, which is featured after the autoethnographical narrative account.

### **The autoethnographical narrative account of the *dérive*: memorial space at Ground Zero**

My brother and I decided to undertake the *dérive* shortly after we had arrived so that the effects of acclimatising to the difference in time and our having jet lag would contribute to our sense of disorientation. We wanted to reflexively analyse what Ground Zero meant to us and it was also an aim to think about the extent to which discursive theory could be drawn on to interpret these responses. We looked at the site of Ground Zero and felt shocked and speechless.

In the year 2004, it was a vast horizontal expanse of concrete space (Figure 25.1), with a few small cabins dotted around the site. This was a place which I took to be representative of injury and of being wounded. It felt important to me to reflect on what the implications of that injury could be:



*Figure 25.1* Photograph 1: Ground Zero.

To be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways.

*(Butler, 2004: xii)*

It was as if the site had been wounded and had not yet healed from the attacks. We wanted to reflect on what this injury meant to us. The above quote by Butler has been used here to explain the importance of thinking about everyone who could suffer from events such as terrorism, war and conflict and to raise questions as to why such events would happen.

Whilst we stood there, several people gathered, probably to offer their respects to loved ones and to mourn what had been a huge international disaster. As I stood there, I thought back to where I was when I had first heard about the terrorist attacks. I had felt shocked and speechless when my brother told me that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center in New York.

Then we decided to walk around Ground Zero. We walked over to a wall where there were several photographs of the World Trade Center before the attacks of September 11, 2001. The Twin Towers were described on a Lower Manhattan Development Corporation poster as ‘tough, un-wielding shapes’ and there were several proposals for re-development such as to rebuild the buildings, to

create even taller buildings, to create a different type of building/s, a monument, memorial and even a park.

### Governance of place through Ground Zero

We could not randomly walk anywhere that we wanted to at Ground Zero as it was fenced off and there were guards patrolling. Therefore, we could only walk according to the designated route set out for us, which was a rectangular route. This was far from what could be considered a *dérive*, so we followed the route right and walked towards the World Financial Center. We tried to look into Ground Zero, though there were parts of the route which had been completely sealed from view. However, there were other parts of the route where it was possible to look downwards on to Ground Zero. The possibilities for the most wide-ranging views were from the windows of the World Financial Center (Figure 25.2). Being there reminded me of what Foucault (1975/1992) had written about panopticism and how the prison works as a system of power where inmates continually regulate their behaviour for fear of being watched by the wardens.

Then we decided that instead of using a map of New York we would use a map of Bangkok to disorientate ourselves. The Bangkok map also had a World Trade Center and so my brother and I would use this as the orientational marker for navigation around Ground Zero. We did not want to repeat the same route as



Figure 25.2 Photograph 2: The view from the World Financial Center.

before so we thought about how we could go underneath Ground Zero. We walked from Tha Ploenchit to Tha Phaya Thai to Expressway (second stage) and then on to Tha Ratchadamri. Walking in these places reminded me of how cities are shaped by 'political, economic and physical structures' such as freeways and other types of road networks (Joyce, 2003: 242). We got on the escalator which took us under Ground Zero. However it was difficult to *dérive* on the escalator precisely because its movement was fixed. We tried to find a river that was on our Bangkok map, but instead found the Subway PATH system.

The Subway PATH system was destroyed on September 11, 2001, but had now been fully renovated and was in public use. This was the closest that we would get to actually standing on Ground Zero, by being underneath it. It felt like a strange and awkward place to be. There was a high level of surveillance in this area, with many obviously placed security cameras on ceilings and walls. We knew that we were almost certainly being watched and this did make us feel awkward. We were not in the subway to get anywhere but were there for a psychogeographical investigation. We were taking photographs and writing notes, which could have been construed as unusual behaviour. This made us even more aware that the public, police and other security agencies could have been watching us. Patrick Joyce (2003: 148) has written about how people present themselves in everyday life in ways which are 'publicly acceptable' because we are continually being watched not only by others but also by CCTV cameras and by the police. Joyce (2003) argues that this has the effect of changing the ways in which we construct our sense of self in contemporary society. I would argue that this all-pervasive technology of CCTV cameras and increased surveillance of citizens is repressive and undemocratic in that as citizens we do not have choice as to whether we will be filmed, which we are told is necessary to prevent crime and terrorism.

### **Analysis of map 1: downtown Manhattan**

This map (Figure 25.3) represents downtown New York with street names and locations from both Bangkok and New York maps. The grid-like patterns of the city are clearly represented along with rivers, the metro system and other buildings and bridges. The map is meant to create a disorientating 'reading' of the city. The large blackened image in the centre of the map is where the World Trade Center once stood, now known as Ground Zero. This has been identified as a key site because I personally felt drawn towards it and this can therefore be compared to how particular areas of social environments are the 'constant currents, fixed points and vortexes' (Debord, 1958: n.p.). In the original *détourné* map, I had glued a photograph of the World Trade Center into the centre of the map. Having done this, it seemed more appropriate to leave the centre of the map empty, to retain it as a memorial site, so I ripped off the photograph, which left behind a strange, blackened, destroyed scar-like pattern.

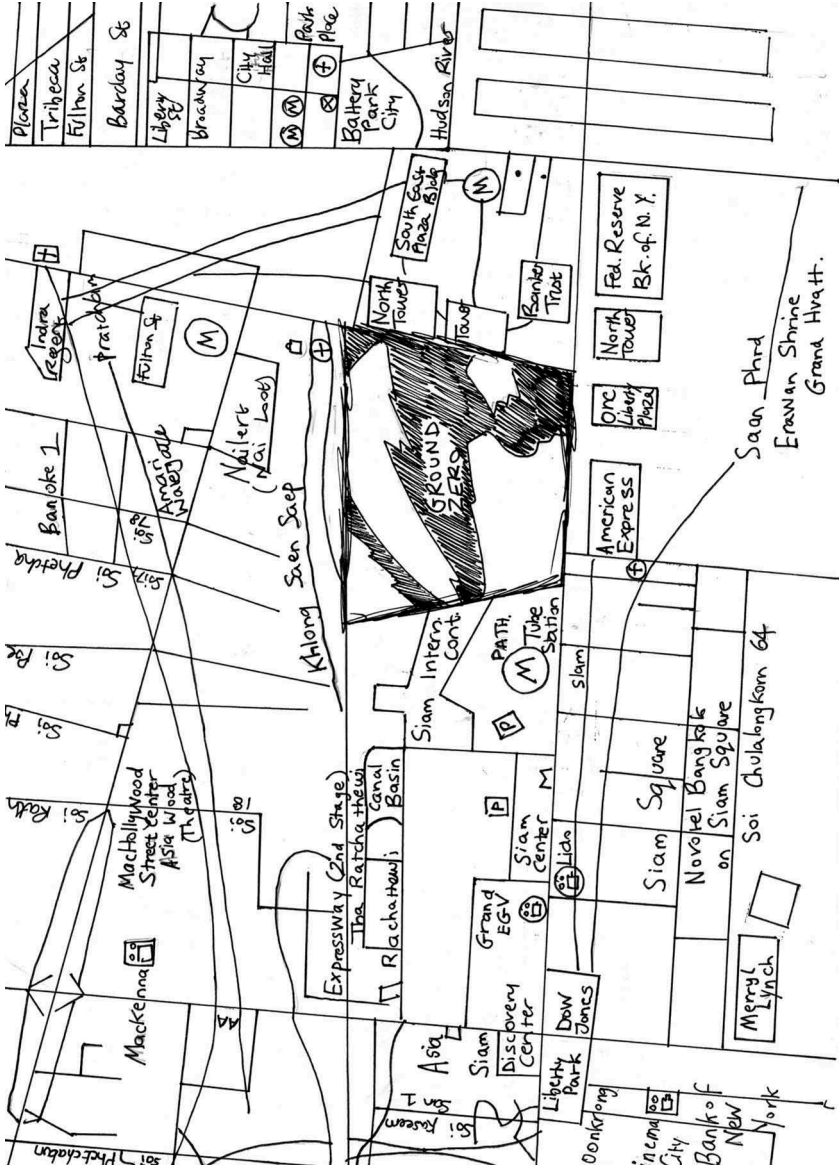


Figure 25.3 Map 1: A détourned map of downtown Manhattan.

## **Conclusions**

In this work I have demonstrated how psychogeographic methods can be used in psychology and have drawn importance to the practice of challenging the routinised ways in which we think and behave in environments. This practice serves as one way to challenge the dominant relations of power in places. This work has also raised questions about how to document social environments and our experiences both textually and visually. I have provided some examples from my research to demonstrate one way that walking could be used as a visual qualitative methodology with both the exposition of an autoethnographical narrative *dérive* account and with a détourned map.

One of the key issues with documenting and writing about the visual world is that the representation of the argument is written. The map, which was meant to stand as the visual document, was heavily loaded with words, words which referred to street names, buildings, bridges and so forth. This demonstrates one of the difficulties with visual qualitative methods in that it is very difficult to document the social world without using words. There are also limits as to what words can 'do' in terms of articulating experience (Frosh, 2002). When my brother and I arrived at Ground Zero we felt shocked and speechless. It was difficult to communicate in words what we felt because there are some types of experiences which cannot be stated in words, such as experiences of trauma, death of loved ones and feelings of love. This is why the early part of the narrative account in my PhD thesis is represented with space in the text and with dots, i.e. '... ..'. This practice is indebted to lettrist and situationist film-making technique with the aims being to disrupt, alter and negate dominant meanings and to engage audiences in alternative radical meaning construction.

My aims in this work were different to the situationists in that I wanted to conceptualise what a walking methodology would look like in psychology. I drew on situationism in relation to discursive theory and autoethnography. The *dérive* at Ground Zero was not strictly a *dérive* because my brother and I were constrained as to where we were permitted and not permitted to walk. It is clear that the act of walking does not in itself change the physical environment, but it can change the ways in which we think about and respond to environments.

Psychogeographical walking can be used as a means to challenge the routine ways in which we move from 'A' to 'B' and is a deconstructive practice to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions of how we should think and behave in places. *Dérives are always governed by the conditions of material circumstances. The aim of dérives should be to analyse these relations of material circumstances in order to intervene and change situations.* This method can be used to begin to consider what alternatives there can be to dominant modes of social organisation and space. The urban environment should be a contested space where alternatives to capitalist forms of organisation can begin to be formulated.

The narrative account of *dérives* and détourned maps serves as a textual means of documenting the research process. However, there is much scope to not only do psychogeographical work with just two people, as documented here, but also to



develop and put into practice psychogeography with larger group sizes which could be considered as participatory research and which could connect with community psychology (Bridger et al., 2019).

Drawing on psychogeographic methodology is one way to further politicise qualitative and critical psychological research (Hayes, 2003), with the wider aims to transform the ‘social organisation of place’ (Pinder, 1996: 414) as well as the complete transformation of capitalist societies. It is clear that this struggle is complex and difficult, given the current order of things with the ongoing spectre of terrorism, global pandemics and the climate change crisis. However, we must continue to visually make sense of the world and to draw on and extend methodologies such as psychogeography, walking and map-making methods. It is a hope that this paper provides some routes for others who may wish to develop their own visual politicised approaches to studying the world.

### Note

1 I would also like to clarify that I do not agree with any forms of violence and aggression.

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## 26

# TRIBAL GATHERINGS

## Using art to disseminate research on club culture

*Sarah Riley, Richard Brown, Christine Griffin and Yvette Morey*

One of the advantages of using visual methods in research is that the immediate and evocative nature of images can be used to increase the accessibility of research findings to a wider audience. There are a variety of ways in which the visual can be used in dissemination, and in this chapter we explore one form by describing the processes we engaged in when producing an art exhibition. This chapter is therefore not about using visual methods to produce data or answer research questions, but the processes involved in our attempt as psychologists to create an innovative form of dissemination by working with an artist to produce mixed media material that communicated our academic work. Our art exhibition aimed to disseminate aspects of work from an Economic and Social Research Council-(ESRC)-funded study entitled *Reverberating Rhythms*, which explored relationships between leisure, identity and participation.<sup>1</sup> Social theorists have argued that leisure activities have become increasingly important indicators of identity and may be sites for new forms of social and political participation (e.g. Giddens, 1991; Maffesoli, 1996). However, empirical work on these ideas is limited and scattered. *Reverberating Rhythms* aimed to address this paucity using electronic dance music culture (EDMC) as an example. EDMC involves socialising and dancing to electronically produced music, often under the influence of stimulant and hallucinogenic drugs and/or alcohol. EDMC was chosen because it is now a significant leisure activity for many young people and within its 20-year-old history it has been analysed in contradictory ways, both as a site for alternative forms of subjectivity and political participation, but also as a subculture that provides its participants with a form of apolitical escapism that reproduces traditional social stratifications (in relation to taste, class, income and gender). (For further discussion of EDMC please see Riley, Morey, & Griffin, 2008, 2010; Riley, Griffin, & Morey, 2010.)

### *Tribal gatherings*

Reverberating Rhythms employed a range of methods, namely, interviews, focus groups, participant observations, questionnaires and photography, with two case studies – of an urban ‘drum and bass’ scene and of a rural ‘free party’ scene, chosen to reflect some of the heterogeneity of EDMC. To briefly describe the difference between the two: drum and bass is characterised by fast-tempo broken-beat drums with heavy and often intricate bass lines. Drum and bass originated as urban, industrial, working-class and Black-oriented music, although at least some aspects of the music have been commercialised and incorporated into wider popular culture. In contrast, ‘free parties’ are unlicensed parties held in rural areas or urban settings, such as empty warehouses. Typically one or more sound systems are set up over a weekend, often, although not exclusively, playing techno or acid-techno. These forms of electronic music are fast, but use a regular 4/4 beat. Acid-techno has had little commercial impact. In our participant observations for both case studies the participants were white (90–100 per cent) and male (60–75 per cent).

Participants were recruited at club and party nights for later participation. Thirty-one interviews, two focus groups and ten participant observations were conducted (divided between the two case studies). Twenty-two males and nine females participated, with an age range of 20–41 years; of whom 82 per cent were ‘white’, 11 per cent ‘mixed ethnicity’ and 8 per cent ‘Black’. Fifty per cent were employed, 21 per cent unemployed, 4 per cent were in college and 25 per cent categorised themselves as ‘other’.<sup>2</sup>

The art exhibition aimed to disseminate an aspect of Reverberating Rhythms that examined a particular theory of social organisation called neo-tribalism (Maffesoli, 1996). Neo-tribal theory argues that in contemporary Western culture people move between a variety of small and potentially temporary groups or ‘neo-tribes’ to which they are members. These neo-tribes are distinguished by shared lifestyles, values and understandings of what is appropriate behaviour. Neo-tribal theory points to leisure as an important site for neo-tribal formations, arguing that such groups are potentially political because they allow participants to create moments of sovereignty over their own existence. Important concepts within neo-tribalism include sociality, proxemics, belonging, hedonism, vitality and sovereignty. The objective of our art exhibition was to articulate these concepts of neo-tribal theory and show how they were reflected in our participants’ talk and experiences of EDMC. By using an art exhibition to address this objective we aimed to reach a wider audience than we would with traditional academic dissemination and to do this in an accessible and vibrant way.

Art exhibitions have the potential to (re)introduce vitality into the way we present and experience our research since they can disseminate ideas through a range of forms of knowing. This ‘extended epistemology’ may include personal, practical, emotional and experiential knowing, as well as rational, cognitive understandings with which we are more familiar. An extended epistemology therefore allows the audience to engage with exhibits from multiple standpoints, creating more dialogical relationships between academics and their audience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; Gergen, with Walter, 1998; Riley & Reason, 2015; Sparkes, 2002). Working with an artist to create an exhibition allows psychologists

to benefit from the training artists have in the conventions, bodies of knowledge and practical skills in working in this medium (Frith, Riley, Archer, & Gleeson, 2005). But despite a flourishing field of arts-based research, few psychologists seem to have done collaborative dissemination projects with artists. Work describing creating art exhibitions as a dissemination practice is relatively scarce and even fewer have written on the process of producing such exhibitions. Indeed, there are few published articles on the processes researchers experience when communicating their findings through art exhibitions (recent examples include Bartlett, 2015; Lapum, Ruttonsha, Church, Yau, & David, 2012).

An early and notable example is Ken Gergen, who with Walter created an exhibition that employed poetry, painting and social science writing to articulate some of the concepts of a social constructionist model of the self. They argued that using these different media enabled them to produce an evocative work that allowed their audience to actively engage with complex and thought-provoking ideas. In doing so they claimed to use their exhibition to blur the boundaries between knower and learner and disseminate research ideas to a wider public (Gergen, with Walter, 1998).

More recently, general practitioner (GP) Liz Lee (2002) wrote about her process of working with artist Susie Freeman on their widely exhibited *Pharmacopoeia* exhibition<sup>3</sup>. *Pharmacopoeia* aimed to get people to consider the ubiquity of pharmaceuticals and in doing so also reflect on their own use of drugs and medicines. Lee and Freeman created textiles that produced visual narratives about people's relationships with pharmaceuticals. Taking advantage of the ambiguity and multiplicity of visual symbolism, they encouraged their audience to engage in a dialogue with their works that sometimes brought very different readings to the same piece.

The subject of *Pharmacopoeia* came from a shared interest in exploring the medical world – Lee through her career as a GP and for Freeman through an invitation from a gallery to address this subject using a technique she had developed in working with textiles. Freeman's technique enabled small objects to be knitted into transparent nylon pockets, creating a material that could be used to make clothing that displayed objects such as pills, vials or sweets. Lee (2002) discussed their collaboration processes, noting that as friends they had a long history of discussions around the issues they subsequently worked on and that their professional relationship was enhanced by a mutual desire to learn from each other and a sense of equality in the relationship. Their work was on-going, so that one piece could provide ideas for subsequent work. Lee also noted that their working relationship developed as they produced more artefacts, with each gaining confidence to contribute ideas that had previously been in the other's area of expertise.

In the present chapter we aim to develop Lee's paper on the processes of collaboration to provide a framework for others wanting to communicate academic theory and analysis through art exhibitions. To do so we use the preceding chapter to discuss the processes involved in the production of our event, evaluate it and provide a 'practicality check list' for those considering doing an art exhibition of their own.

## **Processes and production**

The team involved in the exhibition was artist Richard Brown and academics Sarah Riley, Christine Griffin and Yvette Morey. Richard brought to the group experience in curating art and museum exhibitions and of working in a range of materials, both conceptually and figuratively. He had a degree in fine art and sculpture and experience of working in graphic design. The academics were social psychologists who shared an interest in identity/subjectivity from a poststructuralist perspective. They were experienced qualitative researchers with some previous experience and training in using visual methods. For example, Yvette had used videos in her PhD work on young people, identity and appearance (Morey, 2006); Chris had used photo-elicitation as a research method and Sarah had supervised various student projects using visual methods, as well as attending several practical courses on using new media. At the time of the exhibition the academics had been working together for over a year, forming personal and professional relationships with each other and also with Richard, as he was Sarah's partner. The ability to communicate, organise and listen with respect had therefore already been put in place. In addition we already had relationships with our funding partner, making it easier to successfully apply for further dissemination funding through the ESRC Festival of Social Science call.<sup>4</sup>

To address the first objective of the exhibition, sharing key concepts of neo-tribal theory, the academics of the team had formed a reading group for the book *The Time of the Tribes* (Maffesoli, 1996). *The Time of the Tribes* is an in-depth exposition of neo-tribal theory, but is a conceptually complex book and, by the author's own account, is not always written in an easily accessible style (Maffesoli, 1996).

Our first step was to identify and develop our own understanding of the key concepts of neo-tribalism and then to communicate these ideas to Richard, who had not read the book nor had a psychology background. His degree did, however, give him a familiarity with the concerns of poststructuralist informed psychology, as many of the academic aspects of arts degrees cover shared topics, such as identity, the body and postmodernism. To share *The Time of the Tribes* with Richard, Sarah used ideas and notes made during the reading group to produce a 36-page summary, which she then précised further, creating a 12-page document. Although she considered this an achievement, she was not that surprised when Richard returned it to her with the request to make it more manageable. The academics then produced a third summary document, which took the form of seven pages. Each page represented one theme from neo-tribalism and contained approximately ten lines of text: the title of the theme, a brief description of the theme and two to three quotes from *The Time of the Tribes* that seemed to most clearly articulate the theme. These themes were 'proxemics', 'puissance, vitalism and unicity', 'sociality and belonging', 'family and mutual aid', 'hedonism', 'freedom and politics' and 'the social divine'. We then added two to three quotes from our participants' interview and focus group data that acted as examples of participants' talk that reflected these

themes. For example, for the theme 'sociality and belonging' we used a quote from our participant, starting with the line 'it's nice to have a sense of belonging, isn't it?' Finally, we searched through our photograph data bank looking for images that reflected the theme.

Our photograph data bank comprised photographs taken at participant observations; at other relevant events during the project data collection period (e.g. EDMC festivals); and during the focus groups, where participants had been invited to bring in objects that were related to their experiences of EDMC, which the researchers had photographed. The image we used for 'Sociality and Belonging' (see Figure 26.1, below), for example, was of two young men in hoodie tops standing together on the top of a hill looking down on a large gathering of people, vehicles and sound systems that made up a free party in Wales. The picture evoked both the intimate and large nature of social gatherings that are part of 'belonging' to free party culture.

In choosing the words and images for each theme we produced our final summary document, which Richard accepted as something he could work with. Our training as academics was obviously useful here as the cyclical process of summarising notes down and identifying key quotes drew on skills honed in exam revision and qualitative data analysis. However, this process also highlighted a key difference between the academics and the artist: as academics we were much more comfortable with large amounts of prose. The lesson we learnt was that if we were going to meet our third aim of the exhibition and communicate to a wider audience we were going to have to find ways of being less 'wordy'.

The final summary document allowed us to discuss and clarify our ideas on neo-tribal theory; how it might be being expressed in our participants' experiences of EDMC; and how these ideas may best be represented in the exhibition. Richard suggested that for this type of exhibition we use both art and graphics because they do different kinds of work. The aim of graphic design (often referred to as 'commercial art') is to create images and text that form a distinctive unified style in order to clearly and effectively communicate a set of ideas/concepts. In comparison, art is not required or expected (either historically or culturally) to follow such a literal interpretation. Instead art works are produced through a loose interpretation of ideas and concepts, from which the artist may think tangentially and so create new and diverse perspectives that may seem remote from the original source material.<sup>5</sup> By employing both graphic design and art we aimed to communicate ideas in different ways (literal and conceptual interpretations, for example), as well as through different media (e.g. print, photographs, paintings and music). We hoped that employing these different media and approaches to representation (graphic design and fine art) would allow us to communicate our ideas through an extended epistemology, thus allowing our work to be vibrant, evocative and accessible to people engaging with it from different standpoints. Works that enabled literal and conceptual interpretations of neo-tribalism also allowed us to

# SOCIALITY & BELONGING

**Sociality;** [s\_ʃee ət\_lee ] the tendency to form social groups or live in a community.  
**Belonging;** [bi lɔŋgɪŋ ] Acceptance as a natural member or part/ sense of security in friendship.

The self is exteriorised and transcended through collectivity. Neo-tribalism is a society based on a family-clan-sect structure in which we choose the collectivities to which we belong. These clans represent a “re-enchantment with the world.” Society is not moving towards greater individuality, but to “participation in the mystical sense of the word ... keeping warm together ... a re-actualization of the ancient myth of community” (Maffesoli, 1996)

It's nice to have a sense of belonging isn't it? There's pleasure in being part of a group. There's no cliqueness, everyone's welcome and anything's welcome, so then you know it's really nice, because it's like a sense of warmth. (Lu-Lu)



Figure 26.1 ‘Sociality and Belonging’ – one of the banners from the exhibition.



keep the exhibition conceptually strong as we wove a range of simple and complex ideas generated from *The Time of the Tribes* and Reverberating Rhythms into different media that either reflected or re-worked the key themes we had identified.

Using both graphic design and fine art principles allowed us to produce an exhibition that assumed a level of intellect in its audience, while being entertaining for those who didn't feel like using theirs at the weekend. It also helped us to avoid creating an exhibition that felt alienating, patronising or bland, problems Richard had noted artists can struggle with when producing work for the wider community. Addressing these concerns by using mixed media, graphics and art allowed us therefore to create a conceptually strong exhibition while remaining accessible to a wide audience.

We first focused on the graphic design element of the exhibition. We concluded that the six-page summary document we had produced from our reading of *The Time of the Tribes* could be easily developed into six banners, with each theme having its own banner. Each banner would follow the same format, in which the theme was introduced and then elaborated on by means of text and images. Each banner was headed with the name of the theme, followed by a dictionary definition of the theme, a brief description of the theme that used either a quote or key phrases from *The Time of the Tribes*; a quote from a participant that articulated the theme in relation to EDMC; and an image from our photograph data bank. See Figure 26.1 for an example.

Combining headings, dictionary quotes, Maffesoli quotes, participants' talk and images from club/party culture allowed us to create a 'resonance' of meaning in which the texts and images worked to illustrate, reiterate, reflect or play with each other, what Gergen calls 'a synergistic advantage through juxtaposition' (Gergen, with Walter, 1998: 112). Written text was therefore still important in our attempt to communicate our ideas.

The different 'voices' of the texts and images allowed us to do different things. For example, the quotes from *The Time of the Tribes* allowed us to introduce Maffesoli's style of writing, which employs a dense prose that may be experienced as intellectual or impenetrable, depending on one's standpoint. Since Maffesoli himself argues that his book may be too dense and complex for some academics, it was likely that alone his words may have alienated a non-academic audience. Our brief description of the theme that went with the Maffesoli quote plus the participants' quotes provided other ways to think of the subject matter, acting to both make a link between theory and practice and to allow academic and 'everyday' speech to reflect each other. For example, in the banner 'Proxemics' the theme was explained as:

In sharing a space and an activity we gain a sense of being-together and an emotional attachment to the group. We value the group that we are physically (symbolically or virtually) close to. Proxemics is the glue that binds people together and enables puissance – a will to live

and in the participant's quote:

when you go out clubbing or when you're going to a party or just standing in a queue or just in a load of cars or something there is that kind of sense of community, even if it's just for a moment. I feel it kind of builds up and there's always a certain point it where it kind of comes up and then it drops off again – sometimes you're lucky and it kind of stays there for a while sometimes you've got to hunt around to find it again.

These multiple voices thus gave the audience 'academic' and 'everyday' ways of thinking about each concept, allowing us to set up a dialogue between the two different worlds of social theory and EDMC.

We used the photographic images to illustrate aspects of EDMC (e.g. the kinds of places free parties are held in), provide a sense of atmosphere and to both reinforce and challenge the narrative in the text. The images were therefore multi-purpose, since the ambiguous, intertextual and layered aspects of images can enable playful or subversive disruption, contradiction or reinforcement with accompanying text (Barthes, 1980; Frith, Riley, Archer, & Gleeson, 2005; Pink, 2001). For example, the text in the 'Proxemics' banner was supported with an image from a club night in which people stood, danced or walked near each other in a room that had activity, but was not excessively busy. This image both illustrated the concept (people sharing a space in order to practise a particular set of values and behaviours) and had the potential to open up an interesting dialogue between the words and image used (since in silhouette the relationships between the people were ambiguous, reflecting a sense of the temporary, fluid and dynamic nature of neo-tribal social organisation). We hoped that the interaction between the images and the texts would allow for a conceptually strong exhibition since the dialogue with the texts and images invited the audience to engage with the overall message of the banner (e.g. the role of proxemics) while also making multiple readings that could draw on a wider shared visual culture or their own personal associations.

For some of the banners the process of choosing the images took time, for others it was so fast as to feel intuitive – we 'knew' this was the right image, we just had to work out why. An example of the latter was the photograph of a cluster of white flags fluttering in the breeze taken at a festival, which seemed an obvious image to represent our banner 'FREEDOM and pOLITICS' – the 'everyday politics' (hence the small 'p') of participating in something alternative that you believed in, but which was the antithesis of official organisational governance. The image was of a group of fluttering flags that were identical in not having a logo, symbol or text, suggesting a coming together of people who either rejected official organised governance or who rejected the notion of having anything to say about organised governance. This implicit challenge to traditional political engagement could then be read as a sign of 'freedom', but in being white, the flags also evoked alternative readings, such as surrender.

From a graphic design perspective the aesthetic of the images was also important. We chose images that could be cropped in a similar way and which shared a similar colour scheme and tone, creating a harmonious aesthetic that linked them together. For the same reason, the typography needed to be consistent and both the text and images needed to be of sufficient resolution that they could withstand enlargement, since in ‘real life’ the banner would be forty times larger than the computer screen image of it on which we were working. To create banners that employed consistent typology it was essential to proof read the banners several times before taking them to the printers. Proof reading involved not just checking language but also all aspects of typeface formatting, including text size, font, style and spacing.

The banners became the central set of pieces of the exhibition. We then focused on creating art works that engaged conceptually with aspects of neo-tribalism. Some were ideas waiting to have a focus – as in the central piece ‘Divine’. ‘Divine’ reiterated one of the banners, entitled ‘Social Divine’, which focused on what Maffesoli calls the ‘enchantment’ of social gatherings. Divine was a 2-metre long, 1-metre high board of gold sequins that sparkled in a breeze created by a fan, in which the word ‘Divine’ was written in blue sequins in a script that was evocative of the 1970s (Figure 26.2). ‘Divine’ was made specifically for the exhibition – it represented the opulence and splendour of something divine – however, the idea to ‘write’ in sequins had been in Richard’s mind for some time.

Other pieces were produced as we developed our ideas. One of the photographs we didn’t use for a banner was blown up as a photograph in its own right, unaccompanied by written text, to illustrate the gathering of people



*Figure 26.2* ‘Divine’.

### *Tribal gatherings*

living out hedonistic values. It showed a large gathering of people dancing, illuminated by fire and under an inflatable red star – it was a vivid image evoking Bacchanalian revelry in a modern party context. Other pieces played with sub-cultural symbols. For example, in ‘Everyday Politics’ (Figure 26.3) we painted a large canvas with a reproduction of an image of a riot policeman that had originated from 1968 and which had subsequently been used in various civil disobedience literatures, including those against the Criminal Justice Act.<sup>6</sup> We used this iconic image of youth culture and politics to make a large imposing painting that created an emotional response in the viewer, resonated with other cultural images and interacted with written text so as to pose a question to the viewer. We wanted to use the piece to introduce a controversial aspect of neo-tribal theory (the relationships between ‘everyday’ and traditional politics) and so supported the image with a short piece of text that asked the viewer to consider these relationships. This was accompanied by the following text:



Figure 26.3 ‘Everyday Politics’.

Maffesoli argues that people are turning away from traditional 'modernist' politics and towards 'everyday politics' – a society full of lifestyle groups protected from state intervention by the fact there are too many to focus on. But what happens when the authorities do focus on you, name you and criminalise you? In 1994 the Criminal Justice Act made rave the first youth subculture to be prohibited by law.

A total of fifteen pieces were made. These included the six banners, 'Divine', two paintings, the 'red star' photograph, a suggestions box (where the responses fell into a wastepaper basket), vinyl lettering on the floor that introduced the exhibition and a TV/video installation. In addition we made badges and a handout and had various ESRC promotional materials available. The development of the pieces was cyclical, with ideas being generated and developed between the team, with Sarah coordinating this aspect of the work. At production stage, Richard took over the coordination, doing or supervising any in-house production (as in 'Divine' and 'Everyday Politics') and using Word and Photoshop programs to produce any graphics that were subsequently taken to a professional printer. Both development and production required a range of skills and a lot of time. The development of ideas was aided by regular scheduled meetings between various members of the team, as well as clearly set, agreed individual tasks. Skills and time were drafted in from supportive friends; some worked for free, others for a bottle of whiskey (an expense we did not attempt to claim for).

Producing the pieces was only one aspect of curating the exhibition; we also had to make decisions on how to arrange the works so, while individual pieces were meaningful in their own right, a narrative was also produced as one walked around the exhibition space. One of the advantages of using alternative forms of dissemination, such as an art exhibition, is that it can free researchers from the linear argument structure that characterises most academic writing. Employing different narrative structures changes the 'voice' of research; in doing so it can (re) introduce vitality into academic work by opening up the possibility for new forms of dialogue between the researchers and their audience. These forms of dialogue are produced through the multiple readings that are enabled by the various standpoints that members of an audience will bring with them. Although we are most familiar with linear narrative, other formats are available in our culture. For example, electronic dance music often uses audio samples or, in relation to music videos, visual images that employ a 'looping' narrative, in which sound samples/images will be repeatedly returned to. These acts of repetition work to develop the relationship between the music/image and the audience, by, for example, creating a trance-like effect or articulating a message, such as a celebration of technology (e.g. Hexstatic) or a political critique (e.g. Banco di Gia).

In our exhibition we arranged the pieces in a way that allowed several forms of narrative to be read. The banners were lined up along one wall, which, if followed from the main entrance, led to the centre piece 'Divine'. This order produced a linear narrative, with 'Divine' being the conclusion to the story told by the banners. The banners worked as stand-alone pieces too, each telling its

own story (for example, of the importance of belonging) and, when looked at as a group, also contained 'looping narratives', both in the text (such as emphasising sociality) and through the similar colours and tones of the photographic images.

### **Practicality check list<sup>7</sup>**

- Find adequate and relevant funding.
- Consider what each of the team brings in terms of skills, relationships and materials. For example, a strong understanding of the subject, previous experience of curating exhibitions and of working with each other.
- Consider the equipment, materials or training you need.
- Work with people whose previous work you like.
- Organise a series of formal and informal meetings. Ideas may be best developed through a cyclical process. Different members of the team can take on different roles or be responsible for particular aspects of the work, e.g. writing, painting, organising, but keep in regular contact to check on and develop a shared vision. A regularly updated and referred to timeline of required activities is useful.
- Give time and value to building relationships and ideas through discussions. This will help you develop a shared sense of aesthetics as well as give depth to your work.
- Have a clearly defined aim and concept. Consider how to 'story' your concept for your chosen audience(s).
- Consider articulating your ideas through a range of media in order to communicate the concept in different ways through different modalities.
- Visit the site and plan with the space you have in mind. Try to find a space that has a central location or is easy to access. Be aware that exhibition spaces are often booked up years in advance.
- Identify a wider community of people and resources who may be able to help.
- Focus on promotion – use a range of media and ways to communicate to your chosen audience(s). These may include fliers, banners outside the exhibition space (Figure 26.4), press releases, contacting listing magazines, sending emails via your own and other's lists. Consider who can help you, e.g. university press offices.
- Delegate where you can.
- Accept you have to give up a lot of personal time (you don't have to marry the artist but it can help).
- If you want a long-term archive of the event, host this on a personal blog with a link to it via your university home page. In that way you have more control over it.

The pieces described above formed the main part of the exhibition. However, an early site visit showed that part of the space could be sectioned off with blackout curtains; we decided to turn this area into a club, installing record decks, DJs,

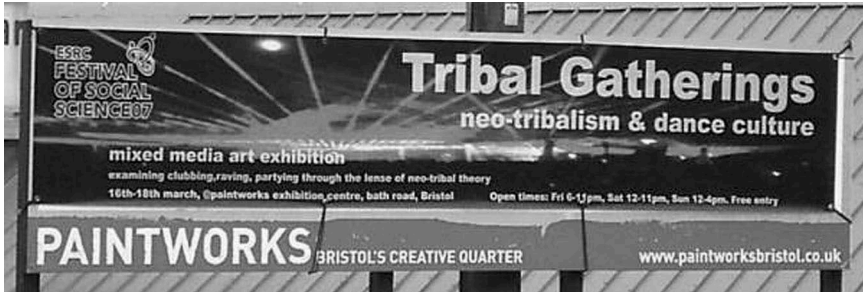


Figure 26.4 Outside banner advertising exhibition.

dance music videos projected on to a white screen and a UV cannon light (a large UV light, kindly lent to us by a friend). On opening night it also had a bar and, as people danced, the space became its own dance culture neo-tribe. We also used the UV cannon to create other forms of interactivity and participation. Leaving a heavily annotated copy of *The Time of the Tribes* and some UV pens by the cannon, we invited people to peruse the copy, find their favourite quote and write it on the wall. In doing so we allowed people to see how academics engage with people (highlighting, annotating etc.) and in giving them direct access to *The Time of the Tribes* we encouraged them to act as academics themselves, exploring the content and style of the book to find passages that said something meaningful to them. To counteract the ‘heaviness’ of Maffesoli, we set this task in a playful way, evoking being naughty children writing on walls, with ink that was only visible in the club context of UV lighting.

### Performance and post-script

With one member of the public already at the doors we opened an hour later than advertised and over the course of a weekend 242 people attended the event. The ESRC provided a feedback questionnaire and the responses on these showed that many of those who attended were not academics, demonstrating that we had met our aim of reaching a wider audience. The audience consisted of people who had an interest in EDMC – including some of the Reverberating Rhythms participants and clubbers/partiers who had seen the promotional material; there were also academics, ESRC staff and passers-by with an interest in art exhibitions. The way people responded to the exhibits, in terms of spending significant time at the exhibition; talking with us about their interpretations; their comments in the suggestions box (some of which were long, many of which thoughtful); the careful copying of Maffesoli quotes on to the UV wall (as well as drawing silly pictures); and the dancing on the opening night all gave us a sense that we had produced a conceptually strong presentation – since people engaged intellectually with our work – and in a way

that was accessible and vibrant – after all, people do not usually dance during academic dissemination.

There were some responses we hadn't expected. For some, the exhibition was a powerful experience – one couple spent 3 hours circulating around the exhibition space, engaging with the each piece as they went, telling us how much they loved it and choosing to write 'cheese' on the UV wall ('because I like cheese and I knew that it would be OK for me to write that'). At the other extreme, a colleague with a background in clubbing spent less than 10 minutes with us – the space seemingly failing to resonate. For us, this was a sign that the exhibition was successful; a good exhibition will have a particular aesthetic and this will not be to everyone's taste. That it resonated for a significant number of people is a sign that we were not bland or patronising. But reaching a wider audience successfully does not mean pleasing everyone.

We felt we had succeeded in representing our work in a way that was more 'engaged' than traditional academic outputs and that this voice enabled us to bring vitality into research dissemination. However, we wonder how seriously the exhibition was taken by other academics – we had hoped to use the exhibition as a way of networking with other academics working in our area and to this end Sarah had sent personal emails to a range of academics working in four local universities in psychology, sociology, geography or arts departments. As far as we can tell, none of these people came, although some sent their postgraduate students. And while their students were enthusiastic, the lack of attendance by their supervisors suggests that academics may not consider this kind of dissemination relevant to themselves because it is not promoted in traditional academic language (e.g. as a seminar or conference).

From the suggestions box two challenging issues emerged. First, that some people had different expectations. For example, one visitor had hoped to participate by bringing his/her own photographs, although there was no suggestion of this in our promotional material. This comment reminded us that we only ever have limited control over the expectations people bring to events. The second set of comments could be interpreted as concerns around the right to exhibit rave culture in relation to losing the spontaneity of events if one pins them down or the right to communicate rave culture to the wider world. The latter comment was of concern for us because we realised we had assumed we had that right, particularly as the exhibition could easily be read as a celebration of the culture – allowing positive comments to be made that could act as a counterpoint to the fairly consistent folk devil status of clubbers (except when money is needed for city centre regeneration). Overall, however, the participants of the event were enthusiastic and celebratory about the event.

We conclude this chapter by noting that art has gained ascendancy in popular culture recently. The implication of our event is that psychology can harness this popularity to create accessible, attractive and interesting forms of dissemination. Our institutions may also support such activities more, given that definitions of impact for the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) for 2021 have widened since REF2014 and now include some dissemination practices.<sup>8</sup>



We suggest that successful events that merge psychology with art are likely to involve a genuine collaboration between artists and psychologists. Such collaborations require time, a focus on relationship building, an expectation for iterative processes in idea generation and the need to respect the artist's visual literacy. For qualitative psychologists, this is likely to mean severely cutting the number of words we want to use. It is also essential to consider how to create different forms of knowing through your work; what the needs, wants and expectations of your audience(s) are; how to make your exhibition aesthetically pleasing; and the different narratives that may be played out across your exhibition space. As a discipline, psychology is still deeply wedded to a naturalistic science model of clear, objective, parsimonious communication. To embrace multiplicity, ambiguity, intertextuality and a lack of control over your 'take-home message' may move many of us out of our comfort zone, but as action researchers note, this is often where the best work is done.

## Notes

- 1 Reverberating Rhythms: Social Identity and Political Participation in Clubland was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ref: RES-000-22-1171).
- 2 These figures are rounded up.
- 3 While not a discussion on the process, also see Mordhorst's (2009) analysis of 'proximity', 'presence' and 'flow of materials' as to why an exhibition of the Pharmacopoeia art resonated with a museum going public; and the following link for a review of Pharmacopoeia and another art exhibition using art made by women in prison from a health professional's perspective. <https://search.proquest.com/openview/90dcbf1a5f7d13334cf4607a7b1e7f2b/1?cbl=2043523&pq-origsite=gscholar>.
- 4 This is an annual competition for dissemination funding; see <https://escr.ukri.org/public-engagement/festival-of-social-science/about-the-festival/>
- 5 For an introduction to the role of graphic design and fine art the following link is useful: [www.cl.cam.ac.uk/~ig206/oak\\_tree.html](http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/~ig206/oak_tree.html)
- 6 The Criminal Justice Act (CJA) included legislation that directly targeted raves. CJA is available at: [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmbills/008/2003008.pdf](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmbills/008/2003008.pdf)
- 7 The Morgan Centre also produces a useful toolkit for putting on an exhibition to disseminate your research; see <http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/schools/soas/morgancentre/toolkits/2008-07-toolkit-exhibition.pdf>
- 8 It is recommended that readers considering an art exhibition as part of their impact case study seek expert advice on what evidence is needed for the reviewers on their unit of assessment to rate highly an art exhibition as an impact activity. This is because definitions of impact and dissemination are different; also high-rated impact requires evidence of reach and significance at a national or international level.

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# SOMETIMES ALL THE LIGHTS GO OUT IN MY HEAD

## Creating Blackout, the multi-sensory immersive experience of bipolar II

*Paul Hanna and Mig Burgess*

### **Introduction**

Throughout the last few decades we have seen a general increase in the diagnosis of mental health conditions, with one in four adults experiencing a mental illness at some point in their lifetime in the UK (NHS, 2009) and internationally (WHO, 2018), with approximately 450 million currently experiencing difficulties (WHO, 2018). Further, in the UK common mental disorders, which include depression, generalised anxiety disorder, panic disorder, phobias, social anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (Kendrick & Pilling, 2012), are said to be currently affecting the lives of around one in six adults (McManus, Bebbington, Jenkins, & Brugha, 2016). Of these conditions, 20% of adults showed symptoms of anxiety and depression (Evans, Macrory, & Randall, 2016), whilst 2% of the population have a diagnosis of bipolar and an estimated 4–6% of the population are on the bipolar spectrum (Merikangas *et al.*, 2011). Further, bipolar often goes undiagnosed or misdiagnosed (Ghaemi, 2001), highlighting the general lack of understanding of bipolar symptoms, diagnoses and, importantly, lived experiences (Figure 27.1).

In the formal sense, bipolar type II (the focus of this chapter) is diagnosed on the basis that an individual experiences at least one episode (i.e. persistent feeling over several days or weeks) of severe depression and symptoms of hypermania (Mind, 2020). Symptoms of hypermania include feeling increased energy; feeling more upbeat; high levels of self-confidence; an inability to sleep; excessive talking; being easily agitated; impaired decision making; racing thoughts; engaging in risky behaviours (e.g. taking drugs, drinking too much, excessive spending, gambling);



*Figure 27.1* 'Understanding bipolar'.

and loss of appetite. The symptoms of a severe depressive episode include: feeling helpless, sad, empty, worried; feeling fatigued; excessive sleeping; overeating; feeling worthless; feeling unable to do things; socially disengaged; having little interest in activities normally experienced as pleasurable (National Institute of Mental Health, 2020).

Whilst the above diagnostic criteria do enable mental health practitioners to make a diagnosis of bipolar, they do not enable them, or others, to understand what it is like to live with the condition/diagnosis or, indeed, how bipolar is experienced beyond the symptomatic. In addition, it reduces the experience of bipolar to the individual level, ignoring the 'complex and embodied arrays of social experiences that are embedded within specific historical, cultural, political and economic settings' (Walker, Hart, & Hanna, 2017, p. 22) whilst also relying on an 'evidence-based rationality' for individualised modes of diagnosis and intervention (e.g. Cromby, Harper, & Reavey, 2013). As a result, individuals experiencing distress are largely silenced as the experts of their own experience, whilst mental health more generally is perpetually reconstructed as something 'abnormal' (e.g. Prilleltensky, 1999). As a result, such a positioning of mental health and distress arguably creates lack of understanding and a deficiency in appropriate support and often results in mental health stigma (Walker, Hart, & Hanna, 2017).

Despite the prevalence of mental health issues in contemporary society, coupled with an increase in public awareness campaigns through traditional and social media, Day, Edgren, and Eshleman (2007) argue that social stigma is one of the most pressing issues for people with mental health issues. Stigma is a very big issue: more than 50% of individuals with a mental health diagnosis have reported that they felt stigmatised by friends and family due to their diagnosis (Twardzicki, 2008). However, it is not just externalised stigma that is affecting individuals experiencing mental health difficulties; it is argued that stigma is also often internalised, resulting in individuals understanding themselves through stigmatised

notions of their diagnosis (e.g. Corrigan et al., 2012). Such external and internal stigma has a negative effect on help-seeking behaviours (Clement et al., 2015) and more generally on subjective wellbeing, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Cruwys & Gunaseelan, 2016).

In an attempt to address mental health stigma a number of academics, practitioners, individuals living with distress and carers have turned to alternative methods to communicate what it is like to experience mental distress and attempt to empower individuals experiencing distress from the position that they are the experts of their experience. For example, in the first edition of this book, Katherine Johnson (2011) utilised the method of photo diaries to explore how LGBT individuals living with mental health issues represented their daily lives through the photographs. In addition, the photographs were exhibited to the general public to showcase the experience of LGBT individuals living with mental health issues, empowering the individuals and opening up a dialogue between the participants and the audience to challenge mental health stigma.

In other examples, Twardzicki (2008) co-produced a performing arts performance with individuals with a mental health diagnosis for a student audience and found that it positively influenced the students' attitudes towards mental health whilst also positively affecting the mood of the individuals with a mental health diagnosis who co-produced the performance. Other examples include Ho, Potash, Ho, Ho, and Chen's (2017) mental health stigma reduction through a community arts collaboration and Peterson and Etter's (2017) work with a forensic population that utilised musical performance, radio productions, art, magazine publications and community float building to reduce stigma within and outside the psychiatric institution.

Within the diagnosis of bipolar, Hawke, Michalak, Maxwell, and Parikh (2014) argue that self-stigma of individuals diagnosed with bipolar is particularly pervasive, often resulting in the perpetuation of the condition due to low self-esteem, increased anxiety/depression and social isolation. To engage with this they facilitated the production of a filmed theatrical intervention based on a personal narrative. A total of 137 individuals, including health-care professionals, students, individuals with bipolar and their friends and family, and the general public took part in the intervention. Following the viewing of the lived experience filmed theatrical intervention they found that there was some positive change in stigmatising attitudes, that was maintained 1 month after viewing the intervention, with the change being statistically significant in health-care service providers, although only modest change in the other subsamples was found, and that eroded over time. It is on these contemporary research examples that Blackout (the project this chapter focuses on) builds.

Blackout aimed to:

- draw on a range of experts and equipment to narrate the experience of an individual with a bipolar type II diagnosis to empower and give voice to the individual;
- produce an innovative, multi-sensory, immersive experience to communicate to the general public the lived experiences of an individual with a bipolar type II diagnosis;

*Sometimes all the lights go out in my head*

- produce a form of mental health communication that challenges stigma through not only the immersive experience but also through discussion between the audience, the production team, mental health practitioners and the narrator;
- build on recent research in mental health communication to gain an understanding of the ways in which experiencing the installation might change people's perspectives on what bipolar II is, how it is understood, and how it is experienced;
- evaluate the audience responses to the installation to explore changes in attitudes towards mental health and help develop the Blackout project going forward.

### **Blackout: developing the concept**

As someone who has worked on a number of multidisciplinary research projects and also in many community mental health settings, my (the lead author's) involvement in the Blackout project team might have appeared 'normal'. However, when I received a meeting invitation 2 years before the final installation was built I was left both excited and baffled. Excited as through word of mouth my name had been recommended to the project narrator (and co-author of this chapter) who explained to me that she was assembling a team of theatre colleagues to produce a 'black box' within which an audience could enter her mind and come closer to understanding what it is like to live with a diagnosis of bipolar type II, a fascinating and worthy endeavour, I thought. Baffled, however, as there was nothing to go on in terms of what this might be besides the following CAD mock-up (Figure 27.2).

In addition to having no idea what might be produced beyond a 'black box', I also found myself in meetings with a theatre director, sound engineer, lighting engineer and visual engineer, all drawing on an array of technical terms for different lights, sounds and visual technologies, and I simply had no idea what they were talking about. What has struck me whilst writing this, however, is as much as

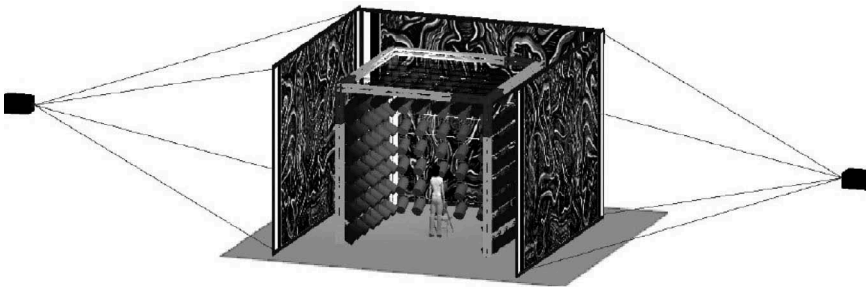


Figure 27.2 CAD mock-up.

I felt out of my depth, it is exactly the power that technical language carries in terms of the expert/non-expert that individuals with mental health difficulties fall foul of on a regular basis and partly why I was so passionate to get involved in Blackout in the first place – an irony I know.

As the months passed and the project evolved, it soon became clearer just what we were trying to produce and what the overall aim of producing a box was. Drawing on the expertise of a director, a sound engineer, two lighting engineers and a video engineer, with me in the mix, the following was developed via a series of meeting and considerations to bring something more concrete to the concept.

Blackout is an installation in which:

- The Audience member sits alone inside the installation.
- The lights are surrounding the person in a box formation.
- The box formation is Mig's mind, and the audience member is inside it.
- They will walk into the installation through a masked off tunnel, so they have no prior knowledge of preconceived ideas of what to expect from seeing the structure.
- Behind the box of lights are 4 projection screens. These screens signify life outside Mig's head.
- The lights block audience from having a clear view of the outside world.

To get to this stage there were several discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of having more than one person in the box at the time to increase audience numbers, but it was felt that this would remove the element of isolation Mig feels. There were discussions about the types of lights to surround the individual, with Birdy lights originally the light of choice until it was realised that noodle lights offer an effective lighting 'cage' (Figures 27.3 and 27.4). There were debates with the director regarding the narrative of the overall experience, with the decision to end the installation on a positive note made the day before the installation opened to the public. The point of this detail here is not to bore you with the process, but rather to highlight the very last-minute nature of working with individuals from the theatre industry who are used to finalising productions at the last minute, which created particular challenges for me trying to design an evaluation without really knowing what the experience would be.

The 6-day fit-up process to build the Blackout installation at the Ivy Theatre in Guildford School of Acting was concluded early morning on the day of opening. The event had sold out and over 200 individuals passed through the experience over the 4 days of the installation. The audience booked tickets in advance of the event and at the time of booking were invited to take part in the evaluation, completing a post-experience questionnaire which utilised the Social Distance Scale (Link et al., 1999) adapted for bipolar specifically; the Mental Illness Stigma Scale (Day, Edgren, & Eshleman, 2007) adapted for bipolar specifically and the Mental Illness: Clinicians' Attitudes Scale (Kassam et al., 2010) adapted for the general public rather than clinicians.

*Sometimes all the lights go out in my head*

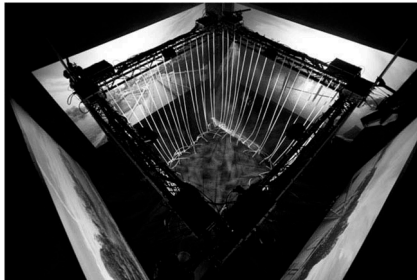
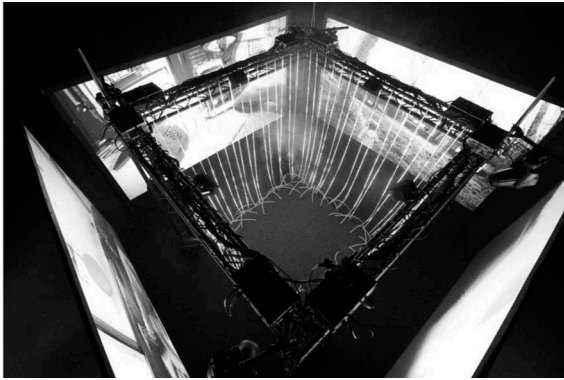
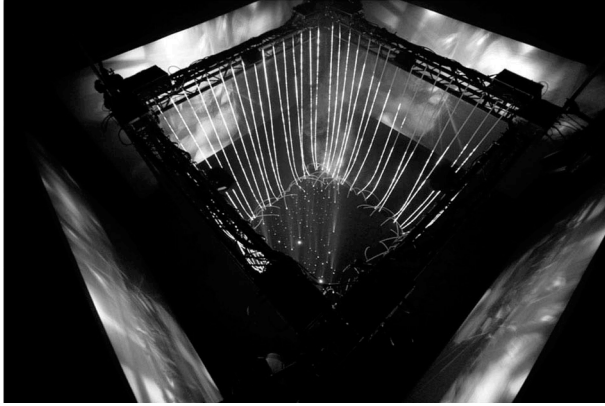


*Figures 27.3 and 27.4 Blackout: the installation.*

Upon arrival individuals checked into the event at the main reception and then waited to be escorted by a staff member with a torch into the Ivy Theatre, which was pitch-black. They were walked to the centre of the theatre where they stepped up through the noodle lights and on to a stage to the Blackout experience. For 6 minutes the audience member stood alone on a platform, surrounded by noodle lights and four large high-definition projector screens. The multi-sensory experience visually and audially narrated Mig's bipolar cycle, including periods of normality, hypermania and depression. At times all four screens were showing the



same thing and at other moments they were showing different things depending on the part of the experience. Audience members were free to look in whatever direction they wished, whilst being encased by the noodle lights which attempted to represent the patterns and chaos of Mig's experience inside her mind (Figures 27.5–27.7).



*Figures 27.5–27.7 Audience response to Blackout.*

*Sometimes all the lights go out in my head*

There was a 30-second full blackout period in the experience and the sound frequency produced moments in which the individual could feel the sound (either through vibrations in the stage or physically on the skin).

On conclusion of the experience the audience member was escorted out through the pitch-black theatre and through to a debrief area which contained various pieces of information about bipolar, signposting for support, drawings and diary extracts from Mig and also two laptops for the individual to complete the immediate post-experience questionnaire which repeated the previous measures and had additional questions reflecting on the Blackout experience. A further follow-up questionnaire including the previous measures was distributed and completed 8–12 weeks after the experience.

From the initial analysis of the immediate post-experience data the installation was well received, with 94% feeling Blackout was a good way to show what it is like to live with a mental diagnosis. A total of 99% were pleased they took part in the experience and 96% suggested they would recommend the event to others. In addition, initial analysis of the pre (at time of booking), post (immediately after experience) and follow-up (8–12 weeks after) quantitative data measuring stigmatising attitudes towards mental health and stigmatising attitudes specifically towards bipolar showed a decrease in negative attitudes when comparing pre and post data. This decrease in negative attitudes also appears to hold at the follow-up point, though more analysis is required and will constitute a future journal article. Given the context of this book, what might be of more interest to the reader is the qualitative responses offered up in the online questionnaire. As one of the participants comments:

Blackout encompasses all senses and surroundings and immerses you in the mindset of someone with bipolar, it allows you to better understand the things they struggle with.

This extract goes some way to make the Blackout team feel that the creation of a visual, audible and multi-sensory experience, whilst extremely challenging in its design and development, did go some way to achieve what we originally set out to do. The sense of understanding and perhaps even empathy created through the multi-sensory experience for the audience was not isolated to this one individual but rather came up across the qualitative data, as the following individual notes:

The way that is showed that when you suffer from mental health it is not always about being bad, you can have a normal life some days but then on other days or moments in the day everything falls apart.

In the survey conducted immediately post-experience audience members were asked to reflect on the experience and comment on what they liked most about the Blackout experience. The wordcloud shown in Figure 27.8 visually represents the 50 most prominent words used in the responses of the 151 individuals who completed the post-experience questionnaire.

As you can see in Figure 27.8, 'experience' and 'immerse' were the most prominently used words in the open-ended responses. In addition, it is clear that

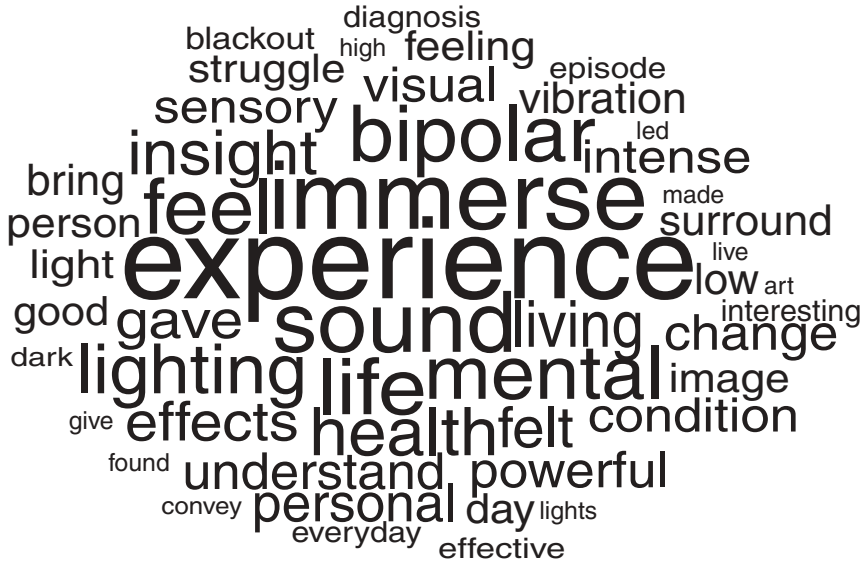


Figure 27.8 Wordcloud.

emotions, empathy and the personal focus of the installation were something that the audience reflected on. To offer the reader a better feel of how these terms were used in the audience reflections on the experience what follows is a range of direct quotes from the survey. Rather than offering a formal qualitative analysis of these extracts, for the purpose of this chapter we will leave it up to the words of the audience to express their experience of Blackout and simply present these through broad thematic titles.

### ***Immersive and intense experience***

The combined use of light, sound, movement, as well as the multi-visual experience using more than one screen created a brilliant experience. I didn't realise but as the piece moved from consistent screens with recognised visuals and sounds, and changed into more distorted versions, my whole body was on edge (almost like watching a horror movie), it really was a fantastic experience.

The immersion in the everyday experiences, the use of sound and visuals to indicate changes in sense and experience of self in relation to mental state and physical surroundings and interactions with others.

### ***A day in the life***

The switch between the content side of life to the intense pain that I felt, it was like I was feeling the anxiety of the thing [bipolar] being pushed upon you when you can't take it.

### *Sometimes all the lights go out in my head*

The immersive experience was very powerful. I felt as though I was living as Mig and this enabled me to see life from her perspective.

Very immersive, I felt as if I had become the person. I think the surround screens had the greatest effect.

I was really impressed that all the footage was filmed on a Go-Pro and actually from Mig's day-to-day life. The intense lighting and being surrounded gave a real felt sense of bipolar compared to a more typical art exhibition.

The way it captured the darkness and emptiness of mental health, that it isn't always an extreme emotion, sometimes it's just quite empty. I don't think many people understand that feeling. And the distracting element of being aware of it in day-to-day life, that was very effectively portrayed.

The insights gained through 'experience' rather than 'knowledge'.

I thought I identified with it at the start and then when things broke down more, I realised how much more severe a mental health breakdown must feel.

I think that it is so immersive that you can actually feel what it is like. It is easy to talk about but to actually feel it is really different.

This is an intensely personal story but has wider resonance, potentially for other conditions as well; would love to see this open to a wider public. It's going to stay with me for a long time.

### ***Empathy for a loved one***

The overload and overwhelming images where everything became blurred and fuzzy demonstrated what my daughter has always said.

To be able to be in the head of a person that suffers, so to understand what it is like for my son to live with conditions, and to be able to be more understanding to help him and maybe recognise the signs earlier for support.

### ***Giving voice and relating***

Having been diagnosed with symptoms that closely relate to bipolar II, I can relate to the experience and it is a good way of representing the disorder.

Although living with depression and anxiety being given the experience of bipolar has given me an insight into what individuals with this diagnosis have.

It gave me a voice, I have struggled for so long to tell others what it is like to live with my condition – but I was able to bring my family along to Blackout to help somewhat tell my story.

I have a diagnosis of severe (borderline manic) depression and anxiety. I am so glad that the issues surrounding mental illness are being de-stigmatised and that

I now feel I can talk about my mental health at work. It has made a big difference. Thanks to all the team.

At the follow-up data collection phase (8–12 weeks post-experience) individuals were again asked to reflect on their experience of Balckout and what they remembered most about it. The following offer a sample of the responses and the impact that the Blackout installation had on the audience members a considerable period after the event:

The immersive sensory experience. I remember the display and information in the foyer telling her story. I remember the intensity of her manic episodes.

Visuals, sound and confusion of what it is like for someone with mental health.

The flashing lights and blurred images during the most difficult episode. Then the total blackness representing depression.

How disorienting the experience was and the appreciation of how that is for sufferers.

I don't know anyone with bipolar so I was not familiar with how people with a diagnosis feel, which the experience helped me gain an idea of.

The turmoil of everyday life and the challenges this poses. Really makes you think about the importance of empathy and understanding – taking the time to give space and thought to the difficulties others face in life.

Striking and innovative presentation of the impact of a mental health condition.

The poignancy of some of the real-life moments caught on the GoPro, the way the intense lighting symbolised the different phases of bipolar, feeling completely absorbed in the experience.

The immersive sensory experience. I remember the vivid difference between the low and the manic, particularly the franticness of the mania. I also really enjoyed reading the material out on display in the foyer and remember the visuals graph which tracked her moods.

I thought I identified with the experience until everything started to fragment. It was quite disturbing to imagine what that must have been like to experience.

I remember sharing in the sense of panic, when the heart rate monitor was spiking and the lights were flashing as the world tipped and bowed under the feet.

The overwhelming sensations. I didn't observe it, I felt it.

### *Sometimes all the lights go out in my head*

The POV [point of view] really drives home the impact a MHD [mental health diagnosis] can have on daily life. The swing between sensory overload, and a deficit/sluggishness to catch up to the pace of the world around.

As highlighted above, for the purpose of this chapter we are not attempting an analysis of the qualitative data from this project; rather we feel that the audience comments presented above immediately after the experience and at the follow-up 2–3 months post-experience highlight the impact of our multi-sensory method for mental health communication. In addition to the survey data presented above, I attended the public viewings for the three days and was humbled to see how much the audience connected to the experiences and engaged in dialogue, speaking openly about how the experience challenged their views on mental health, enabling them to better understand what it is like to live with bipolar and appreciate that individuals diagnosed with the condition are not ‘abnormal’ but just experience their life in different ways.

### **Reflecting on Blackout**

Whilst much of what has been covered in the above highlights the positive elements of the Blackout installation, the project was not without its negative impacts. The most obvious of the negative impacts was the impact it had on the Blackout team, and in particular Mig. In order to create the experience we set out to create, Mig had to divulge every element of her life to the creative team. Whilst at times this was positive, it was clear to see on a number of occasions just how much this took out of Mig when having to express/narrate her experiences of the bipolar cycle she lives. In addition, during the six days of the build the intensity of the situation and the visual and audible creation of the cycle for the Blackout experience resulted in Mig reliving her cycle through the week, experiencing mania when directing the mania element of the installation and experiencing depression and distress when narrating these elements. The culmination of this had quite a profound impact on Mig and on the day of the launch she was unable to attend the event for the morning.

In addition to the negative impacts on Mig and the team, there were instances at the event where individuals went through the installation and came out in varying states of distress. The individual for whom this was most prominent was a young man in his early 20s. As he left the installation he went to the information area in the venue and was looking at the displayed visual (drawings) and written (diary extracts) information on Mig’s life. As he stood there it became apparent the experience had impacted him in a very negative way. As I spoke with him and offered informal support and signposted him to support organisations, he informed me that he had recently received a bipolar II diagnosis. Visibly distressed, he told me how he could really relate to the Blackout experience, but for him this was in no way emancipatory; rather it created a sense of hopelessness for him as he was a lot younger than Mig and as she was still experiencing her diagnosis in these ways he felt there would be no end to his distress. Mig took him off for a long conversation and provided him with further support. What this highlights is how

creative projects have a lot of potential for unintended consequences and, whilst the experience was largely received very positively, everyone brings their own history and hopes which can result in a different outcome from what was hoped.

This project has a range of implications for psychology methods by building on the emerging body of work in visual methods. By offering up something multi-sensory and immersive I hope that this chapter has shown that the creative sensory method we used for Blackout furthers this body of work and hopefully adds an additional way in which we can give voice to those experiencing distress, offering more than the traditional 'expert voice' of the psychologist. I hope that this chapter has also shown the impact of the experience on the audience in terms of offering people a chance to get a bit closer to understanding and 'feeling' what it is like to live with mental health difficulties. Whilst I appreciate that I was exceptionally lucky to fall into a creative team with access to expertise and equipment (largely donated by industry partners) not often found in a psychology department, such teams and equipment exist at many higher education institutions, so I hope that you as the reader might be encouraged to build relationships with other departments and embark on similar projects. Further, with the push towards matched funding on research grant applications, I see no reason why more projects could not write the equipment as in-kind support in grant applications. I also see no reason why this project, and future research, cannot attempt to translate such immersive experiences into a virtual reality version, offering a far wider audience the opportunity to engage with the experience, albeit in a slightly different way.

This project (and arguably this chapter) was in no way your 'traditional' piece of psychological research. Far from the research methods text books of undergraduate days in which linearity in research process is presented as standard, this project was complex, chaotic and unconventional. But yet, as someone who has worked on many different projects over a number of years, it is certainly the most interesting and impactful I have ever worked on. Maybe it is because of the relationship you form with an individual living with distress over a couple of years, when with most methodological approaches you simply wouldn't have that level of connection, or maybe it is the way in which the installation managed to have a profound impact on its audience, I am not sure. What I am sure about however is that, despite all of its challenges, if the opportunity to do something similar came up in the future I would take it up at the drop of a hat, and if you have made it this far in this unconventional chapter then I would urge you to do the same.

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## **PART IV**

Ethical, analytical and  
methodological reflections on  
visual research



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# 28

## THE PHOTO-ELICITATION INTERVIEW AS A MULTIMODAL SITE FOR REFLEXIVITY

*Tim Fawns*

Photo-elicitation interviews involve more than the addition of photos as prompts that serve to augment narratives or enhance the accuracy of participant remembering. They create opportunities for greater participant agency by allowing some selective control over what is discussed. More importantly, they are multimodal, social and material encounters that can foreground past spaces and times within current discussions, and allow insight into the participant's navigation of material elements. In this chapter, I present some reflections on my experiences of using photo-elicitation interviews in the study of autobiographical memory and photographic practice, and highlight some opportunities and challenges for psychological research.

In particular, I position the photograph as an element located in relation to historical, social and material photography practices. This raises considerations around: the sharing of control within interviews; the term "elicitation" in relation to issues of truth, representation and source evaluation; and the photo-elicitation interview as a constructed, multimodal encounter that requires reflexivity around data generation and the analytical approach adopted.

On the basis of this discussion, I present some implications for visual approaches to psychological research. Firstly, I discuss the social context of the interview and the researcher's role in allowing for participant agency. I then highlight the need for reflexivity not only during but also after the interview, arguing that theoretical precision is important in identifying the relationship between the researcher's understanding of photography and retrospective accounts, what constitutes the object of analysis and the area of enquiry. Finally, I caution against analysing the visual and verbal in isolation of each other, since this can lead to reduced

understandings of the social and material context in which the data are produced, as well as problematic positions in relation to truth and evidence. By adhering to these principles, visual methods can ask important psychological questions and inform the development of reflexive methods that complement more traditional approaches.

## **Introduction**

In the introduction to the previous volume of this book, Reavey (2012) pointed out a neglect, within psychology, of visual methods. This, she suggested, might stem from a desire to enhance the status of psychological knowledge through scientific and quantifiable approaches.<sup>1</sup> However, qualitative research has gained traction within psychological research over the last few decades as a means of probing the contextual details and personalised meaning that so clearly shape the way that generalised psychological mechanisms manifest in everyday life, yet are often removed or bracketed as “confounding variables” in the design of controlled studies. Visual methods, as I will argue, can be used to foreground aspects of the environment, and the social and material context in which people operate.

Bates et al. (Bates, McCann, Kaye, & Taylor, 2017) suggested that the lack of take-up of visual approaches in psychology might be explained by a lack of clear guidance and consensus on how to conduct such research. Yet, if we take up what Stanczak (2007) calls a reflexive methodology, in which we accept not the direct meaning contained within an image but the subjective interpretation of it by the participant, then it may be that each project requires its own unique method (see also Pink, 2007). In that case, guidance around methods can only take us so far, and effective use of visual methods requires the development of a sensibility, rather than a systematic approach, because it is complexity, rather than consistency, that is the greater, and more important, challenge.

In this chapter, I position environment and context, not just as influencing factors, but as crucial elements for cognition and behaviour. Visual approaches can help us to understand this, by foregrounding the material contexts of both past (e.g. via the objects and environments that can be seen in photographs) and present (e.g. via the physical movements that can be observed within an interview). However, visual elements, such as images, photographs, gestures or physical spaces and objects, are important not only in and of themselves, but also in combination with other elements, such as language (e.g. Samuels, 2007). Thus, the sensibility that I am advocating here includes an appreciation of not only the material, but also the social aspects of the visual. This requires consideration of the situated sense making of both researcher and participant, separately and in combination. Analyses that elide the social context can be misleading, neglecting important issues of research reflexivity and potentially presenting more tangible forms of data (e.g. transcripts or images) as inherently objective and truthful.

I propose that visual methods can be most productive for psychological research by considering visual elements, such as photographs, in relation to the social and material, multimodal activity of the site of the research. Put simply, the visual

shapes, and is shaped by, non-visual elements, and cannot be separated out without disrupting the fabric of the whole encounter. In the next section, I explain how this sensibility can inform rich analyses of qualitative data. Specifically, I discuss my experiences of, and reflections on, using photo-elicitation interviews in two recent studies of the relationship between photography and autobiographical memory.

### **On studying photographs and photography**

In a recent project, I was interested in understanding more about how people use photography in remembering their lives. In response to the widespread integration of digital technology into photographic practices, cultures and infrastructures, I decided to explore how people understood these changes in relation to remembering their own, particular, idiosyncratic life experiences. I interviewed a small sample of people (21), across two studies, as they selected, handled, viewed and talked about how they had come to have their photographs, and what they had done with them. The first study involved six participants (including one shared interview with two participants) who had attended the same wedding 18 months previously, in order to understand different approaches to remembering a shared event. In the second study, I interviewed 15 people in relation to the practices and beliefs around photography and remembering that had evolved across their lifetimes. Though my participants were well educated, with most of them working in higher education, they seemed to have somewhat vague understandings of how memory works, and of their own processes and practices of both photography and remembering. Further, much of their photographic activity involved ad hoc, unsystematic and spontaneous acts (see Fawns, 2019, for more details of these results). Thus, my area of enquiry turned out to be more complex than I had anticipated, and more difficult for participants to articulate through words alone.

The complexity of how my participants used photography within acts of remembering has generally not been captured by psychological approaches to understanding autobiographical memory (i.e. memory for life experiences). Consider the influential distinction between episodic and semantic memory (Endel Tulving, 1972, 1983). Episodic memory involves a sense of subjective re-experience, often accompanied by imagery and emotions, where the person doing the remembering feels like the same person who did the original experiencing. Semantic memory, on the other hand, involves the bringing to mind of facts, details and ideas that do not contain those same kinds of subjective information and feelings. Most psychology studies have focused on short-term memory for arbitrary elements such as nonsense syllables and word lists, even when investigating episodic memory (e.g. Endel Tulving, 1984). Prompts are sometimes used, such as photos (e.g. Koutstaal, Schacter, Johnson, & Galluccio, 1999) or diaries (e.g. Barclay & Wellman, 1986), for longer-term remembering, but the focus is almost always on the remembered content and almost never on how a participant interacts with the prompt, other than as a description of the method.

My modest, qualitative studies clearly demonstrated some problems with the traditional reliance on controlled approaches. For one thing, the interviews revealed

an important distinction between *photographs* as objects and *photography* as a set of practices. This distinction is elided in controlled studies of photography, where the focus is on what is remembered in response to exposure to a photograph, and the highly directive qualities of the viewing practices are rendered invisible. It was obvious within my interviews that a variety of different behaviours can manifest through interaction with a photograph (e.g. I saw evidence of a large range of organising and sharing practices that not only accompanied, but also configured, the viewing of photos). Indeed, photographs were not even necessarily the focal point of the material and social interactions in which they were involved. In my studies, photographs were not just objects to be looked at, they were temporally located elements of a complex, historical, social and material constellation of photographic and remembering activity. For each photograph, the participant may have taken it, or posed for it, or been given it by a particular friend or relative. That initial encounter with the photograph was an experience that could, itself, be remembered. Early interactions were also assimilated into longer relationships with the image that could be emotive, and that could involve other practices of organising and sharing with others. This could also involve a variety of mediating and remediating practices: images had often been both digitally and materially transformed over time through creative and communicative acts (Fawns, 2019).

It is also worth remembering that my understanding of my participants' photographs was bound by the contexts attributed to them within the interview. Outside of interviews, photographs can have very complex social lives, and there can be value in exploring the ways in which they move around, undergo material transformation and propagate. For example, along with colleagues, I mapped the ways in which photographs of the wedding (study 1) had moved around, showing how different participants acted, at different times, as directors, creators, gatekeepers, consumers, critics and archivists (Fawns, Macleod, & Quayle, 2012). Elsewhere, I discussed the growing complexity of digital contexts; the places and spaces that photos come to inhabit, often becoming detached from their intended and traditional contexts, and changing their meaning in relation to where and how they are encountered (Fawns, 2014). Photographs are not just passive objects, looked at in interviews to remind participants about past times, places and happenings. Each photograph has a social, material and emotional history in relation to the participant and, potentially, beyond.

### **The interview as multimodal, social and material encounter**

If photography is a social process, then at least some sharing of the control of the interview may be appropriate so that both researcher and participant can mutually determine the direction and topics of conversation (Bates et al., 2017; Rose, 2012). Similarly, the importance of material engagement with photography suggests that there is value in allowing participants some physical control over how photographs, albums, cameras, computers, and so on, are accessed and manipulated. In my interviews, we moved between physical albums, Facebook, cloud-based digital archives, mobile devices, desktop computers, framed displays

### *The photo-elicitation interview*

(both digital and analogue) and more, each producing different kinds of interaction. By engaging meaningfully with these material and social aspects of the interview, we brought to the foreground issues that would be lost by concentrating only on the image. For example, viewing images within a Facebook platform prompted discussion around concerns of privacy and constrained identity formation. Pulling boxes of photographs from a loft space prompted discussion of the influence of physical accessibility on engagement with photographs. Looking at framed photographs prompted discussion of the status afforded to grandchildren by virtue of being displayed in prominent locations within the home.

While it is increasingly recognised that an appreciation of the social aspect of qualitative (if not yet quantitative) psychological research is crucial to methodological reflexivity (e.g. in which the researcher acknowledges her active role in the research process), the material is rarely accounted for in any kind of reflexive way. Yet, as these examples show, the social and material are not separate, but are mutually configuring. Participant agency is engendered through an entanglement of social and material activity, and this requires skill on the part of the researcher. The participant cannot simply be given agency: the researcher must work with the participant to create a dynamic in which the participant feels able to and is willing to interact, as well as to share thoughts, feelings and beliefs. The desired distribution of agency between researcher and participant requires consideration of the research question, and whoever is in command of navigating the photographs being discussed, for example, has considerable power to configure and structure the conversation. In my studies, I had sought a balance of allowing my participants to prepare in advance of the interview (both to enable greater agency, and to increase the likelihood that they would find the photos they most wanted to talk about) and asking them to search through their collections during the interview. Since my study was about engagement with photographic practices, watching them look for things provided valuable insight into their approaches to navigating their collections and archives.

In my case, I found that the available photographs and the process of looking through them presented my participants with a range of options to talk about, and this sometimes led the conversation away from the points that I had intended to focus on. At the same time, the process of participants navigating their own albums and collections provided other information about how they could engage with and even mobilise photographs as a conversational move. For example, some participants seemed to prefer to tell stories associated with the images rather than discuss more complex issues of memory or photography, and they could use photographs as a way of moving the conversation away from more challenging topics. Consider the excerpt below, from the shared interview in the wedding study.

*TF:* And does it bother you, or are you happy to continue to skip [through large collections of photos]?

*IO:* It annoys me slightly.



YS: It's tiring, well it's a bit annoying if you're skimming through them but there's so much – data storage is not an issue because the hard drive is big enough on this and then we've got an external hard drive to save things on at home ... which is why bad ones like these ones are still there, so.

IO: That's a nice one.

YS: .lovely picture, yeah.

TF: Who's that?

IO noticed an attractive photograph (“nice one”), and immediately the conversation shifted from a discussion of excessive photo-taking and storage capacity to a focus on who is shown in the image. Even so, these conversations remained relevant to the area of enquiry, and could provide tacit information about the relationship between narrative, photography and remembering.

The photo-elicitation interview as multimodal encounter, then, benefits from reflexivity in relation to what should constitute data. For me, alongside a commitment to thinking about the interrelatedness of visual elements and language, it was important, within my analysis, not to confuse the *events* described in the interview, the *descriptions* of those events and the *interview* itself. All of these were relevant, but I needed to be clear in my mind how each element was used within the analysis. In my studies, I used the photographic practices described in the interviews as guiding examples of what participants had done in the past. The descriptions of those past practices served as a basis for developing a sense of how participants saw the relationship between remembering and photography. The interviews – understood as a multimodal encounter in which participants engaged in social and material practices of sharing and remembering – helped me to contextualise the described past practices, by providing a sense of the materials and photographs being discussed. Indeed, the photos and materials present in the interviews *were*, mostly, those being described. The interviews also provided a more immediate sense of how participants interacted with their materials in a social context, albeit within a formally structured research setting. The interactions that I saw during the interview gave me a sense of interaction that I could apply to those descriptions, thereby accounting for elements of materiality and embodied practice that are often absent from narratives.

Some photo-elicitation researchers have positioned photographs as aids to, or shapers of, discussion, preferring to analyse only the resultant textual narratives (e.g. Bates et al., 2017). Yet, by watching my participants engage with their photographic paraphernalia – printed photos, albums, boxes, cupboards, loft spaces, displays, cameras, posters, phones, tablets, computers – I developed a sense of how they moved in and around their materials, constructing social spaces in which to remember and communicate. After each interview, I synthesised – via a written summary – what I had interpreted from what they said (and how they said it), my impression of their social and material activity and the space in which the encounter had taken place. These summaries were later used as counterpoints to the more decontextualised groupings of excerpts according to my thematic coding. This was extremely helpful in bringing the context of the interview back to my

interpretation of each excerpt. It reminded me, for example, of how the participant had handled and manipulated the objects discussed, the physical challenges and skills involved, and how they had positioned themselves when looking.<sup>2</sup> One participant was interviewed in his work office, and had gathered photographs from a range of sources on to an iPad to make it easier to share them with me by passing the device back and forth. Another, interviewed in her home, sat at a desktop PC with only one chair, meaning that I – her partner in conversation – stood and looked over her shoulder. These situations showed how environments and artefacts could configure the material and social activity of remembering. It follows that the location of the interview (home, office, meeting room) is important, and an area deserving of greater research attention.

All interviews – whether they involve photographs or not – are multimodal, embodied, physical and social experiences. However, after interviews such as mine, there is a risk that the researcher attempts to understand transcripts or photographs in isolation. Neither transcripts nor photos (nor even both together) sufficiently represent the multimodality of the interview. They are useful reference points, but when analysing one or both, it is worth also considering the interaction between what was said and what was going on, within the interview, at the time. For example, was this photograph talked about because it holds significant meaning for the participant, or because it was next in a series of images that happened to be in focus? Did the participant skip over potentially relevant photographs because they were difficult to access? Taking such questions into account can reveal important material elements of engagement with photography and how it can structure conversation and remembering.

### **On “elicitation”**

The term elicitation suggests that photographs can be used to draw something out of the participants, such as *more* information or *more accurate* information. Certainly, there have been claims that photo-elicitation methods can generate more detailed accounts (Collier, 1957; Harper, 2002; Samuels, 2007). Accuracy, on the other hand, is a problematic concept, and the tension between accuracy, memory and photography is complex.

It has been proposed that photographs, by being generated through the action of light reflecting off real objects, are “indexically” linked to their referent<sup>3</sup> (Barthes, 1981). Yet, their capacity to directly and objectively represent the past is confounded in a number of ways. Firstly, the action of the light is mediated by the particular mechanics of the camera and the properties of the photographic material (for rich examples of how important the mechanics and materials are to what can be produced, see the essays on early photography in Trachtenberg, 1980). More importantly, the content of what is shown, or what Rose (2012) called the *site of the image*, is only one factor in relation to how a photograph is understood, along with the *site of production* (i.e. the taking of the photo, where photographs are spatially, temporally and politically framed through composition, orchestration and posing) and the *site of audiencing* (i.e. the viewing context, where interpretation is

contingent on the context of who is viewing the image, and in what circumstances, as well as the history of the viewer's interactions with that photo).

If the photograph does not present objective truth, memory is now seen as a notoriously unreliable instrument for accurately recording and replaying the past (see, for example, Schacter et al., 2008 on eyewitness testimony). Foreshadowed by the earlier work of William James (1890) and Frederick Bartlett (1932), psychologists have come to recognise that this is not necessarily due to memory flaws or errors, but because the primary function of memory may not be to accurately remember the past. For example, to support effective decision making, and the simulation and prediction of possible futures (Conway, 2009; Glenberg, Witt, & Metcalfe, 2013; Nairne & Pandeirada, 2008), memory must be constructive, taking account of the subsequent accumulation of knowledge and experience, as well the rememberer's current perspective. To borrow from psychologist Martin Conway (2005), it is not only correspondence to the past that is important in memory, but also coherence with the present sense of self.

In light of these challenges, I could not be overly reliant on the accuracy of my data in relation to the actual past practices of my participants. Instead, my focus was on understanding how participants understood their photography practices in relation to remembering, and on what I could learn from that about the nature of socially and materially distributed memory. In any case, thought should be given to whether the researcher is actually trying to establish a truthful account of the past, and to what kind of truth is important. My interview narratives were taken, not as precisely accurate records of the past, but as indicative accounts of "contemporary relevance" to the participants (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p. 137). I also understood them as socially produced: photos provide a common frame of reference for participant and researcher to examine a past scene, and while each must interpret the image according to their own experiences and sensibilities, they must also negotiate a shared meaning within the conversation. As Bates et al. (2017) pointed out, the reason for using images is not just to promote recall but to promote dialogue, and photo-elicitation allows the researcher to get a sense of what the photographs mean to the participants (Harper, 1986). Yet if, as Stanczak (2007) noted, the subjectivities that photographs elicit can be productively probed and analysed, then it should be acknowledged that these are actually socially produced intersubjectivities. As Harper wrote: "When two or more people discuss the meaning of photographs they try to figure out something together. This is, I believe, an ideal model for research" (2002, p. 23).

More important than accuracy and detail, as Harper (2002) argued, is that photographs elicit a "different kind of information". Stanczak's (2007) book on visual research, for example, contains a series of case studies highlighting "new knowledge that might have gone unnoticed had these methods not been employed" (p. 10). Photographs can prompt a participant to think about something that was not necessarily forgotten or unknown, but that would not otherwise have been thought about (Fawns, 2019). In some cases, it may involve the researcher pointing out or asking about some element of an image that the participant had not previously noticed or given much thought to. Sometimes, by presenting

information that challenges the coherence of a participant's current perspective, photos can disrupt established narratives or create new ones (Brookfield, Brown, & Reavey, 2008; Reavey, 2012). Thus, visual cues do not just augment narratives but can unsettle and question them, leading to new ideas of past experience that may be more complex and nuanced (Reavey, 2012). In this sense, elicitation is not so much the drawing out of *more* information, but of a different, potentially troublesome, view of the past.

Similarly, memory can nuance and challenge what appears to be shown in a photograph. In my studies, even quite open lines of questioning, combined with photographic stimuli, could “elicit” elements of the emotional history of the participant and their photographs. For example, one participant, in response to a very simple question, demonstrated her ability to control the digital photo frame on her wall. This led to her selecting a particular image to look at. Here is the beginning of a rich discussion of her emotional history with the image.

So I can get all of them like that [multiple photos displayed as squares], and then I can just choose which one I want. So this is one that I really like. So this is a photo of my dad, and the dog, and it was a hard photograph – printed photograph – that I carried round with me for years when I was travelling, of my dad and [the dog], and it got all kind of crumpled up and I didn't have the negative, I didn't have another copy of it . And my brother-in-law did this lovely thing, which you see in the top right-hand corner where it's clouds, that was actually all kind of just crumpled torn paper, and he put it on the computer, fiddled around with it and made it like that as a gift for me, and then sent me the electronic copy like that. And I just love that photo, really, really love it.

The materiality of the photograph was clearly important here, and played a role in the elicitation of emotions and reflections. For example, the participant suggested that the image felt more real displayed within her digital photo frame than the printed photograph:

perhaps because it's a bit bigger ... you know, it's not terribly good quality the way it reproduces photos, but there's something very kind of vivid about them, as if it's kind of lit from the back, rather than looking at a photograph.

Here, then, we can see that it is not just the image itself that elicits accounts of the past but the historical, social, material and emotional relationship between participant and image (which also includes other people, such as the father and brother-in-law). As Fenwick (2014, p. 45) argued, in relation to educational research, “materials tend to be ignored as part of the backdrop for human action, dismissed in a preoccupation with consciousness and cognition, or relegated to brute tools subordinated to human intention and design”. Indeed, even in approaches that pay attention to the social elements of psychology, materiality is

often forgotten.<sup>4</sup> Yet holding, looking at and talking about photographs are activities richly connected with remembering (Samuels, 2007). Using photographs within interviews can help us to shift attention toward the social and material contexts of past experience, rather than the predominantly temporal contexts on which verbal, narrative accounts tend to be focused. Photographs can highlight elements that are not captured by verbal accounts, and that the participant may not even be aware of. They can resurface the physical settings of past experience, facilitating “a more complex and layered account, and one that is more seeped in emotional resonances and reminders” (Reavey, 2012, p. 6).

Perhaps, then, it is emotional and embodied, social and material complexity that can be *elicited*. Rather than a way of producing more accurate accounts, my photo-elicitation interviews were multimodal encounters that could be studied in relation to how engagement with images shapes what is talked about and how it is remembered. In many cases, the stories of my participants were prompted by a particular photograph, but would normally go well beyond what I – the researcher – could see in the image. Narrative also spread across multiple photographs as we continued looking through collections (or would be cut off as the participant navigated to the next image and was prompted in a different direction). What emerged was a curious combination of memory, inference, photographic content, association and generalised commentary on memory and/or photography. This was instructive for my particular area of enquiry, but might have been problematic if I had been focused on actual, historical photography practices, since the interview was, simultaneously, the site of study, and a source of information about other, less immediate and less reliable, sites of study.

### **Going forward with visual methods in psychology**

In this section, I consider some implications for visual approaches to research. My focus is specifically on psychological research in the context of remembering, but many of these issues apply to visual research more generally.

To begin with, in order to value the social and material activity of engaging with visual elements such as photographs, it may be important to allow participants to make choices and to have relative freedom in how they move around and manipulate the interview environment. For some research, the participant’s home or a familiar space will constitute a more appropriate remembering environment, allowing insight into how they have configured an important material and social space, and how they operate within it. Another reason for using familiar environments over which participants have some control is that they are more likely to contain the kinds of technologies that are actively used by those participants in everyday contexts. As Reavey (2012) pointed out, in relation to emerging technologically mediated practices, it is important to bring these “everyday forms of communication and representation” (p. 6) into research settings if they are to be authentically understood.

Allowing participants to choose which photographs they will talk about gives them more agency in the research process (Bates et al., 2017; Samuels, 2007),

### *The photo-elicitation interview*

provides opportunities for structuring the interview in a way that is relevant to their interests (Reavey, 2012), can help them get around blocks in conversation (Pink, 2007) and allows participants to discuss practices in ways that are not predictable by the researcher. Selectivity is a crucial element in both memory and photography, so paying attention to how participants select which photographs to talk about and which stories to tell can be illuminating. For example, it was relevant to some of my interviews that in talking about the participant's historical relationship with photography, we would proceed room by room, starting with the most comfortable or the most interesting space first. However, although I have argued for participant agency, there are often good reasons for the researcher to be actively involved in the social and material interactions being researched. Both remembering and photography practices are social activities, and a researcher who tries to adopt a passive approach (e.g. in the service of an objective or neutral position) may be just as artificial, or, indeed, more artificial, than one who takes an openly active role.

In any case, it may not be ethical for the researcher to maintain neutrality. In research into memory, for example, the potential to unsettle established narratives or surface uncomfortable memories means that the comfort and emotional safety of the participant should be considered, and the possibility of challenging and, potentially, transformative conversations should be discussed before the interview begins. It is easy to underestimate this point: I, for one, did not expect my research to be particularly challenging or emotional for my participants, since it was focused on general beliefs and ideas about photography and memory. During the analysis, however, I began to appreciate my responsibility for the welfare of my participants, and to question the possibility of informed consent. For example, it became clear to me that participants could not simply avoid problematic photographs, because they did not always know what images they were about to stumble across, nor the emotional effect that even seemingly innocuous photos could have. Further, participants could not anticipate beforehand how reflecting on their photographic practices and on their ways of remembering might shape their perspectives, beliefs and future practices. The research interviews were certainly not a neutral form of data collection that left the participant unchanged. Indeed, in a subsequent email exchange (inserted here with permission), one participant explained the significant effect that the interview had had, not only on her photographic practices but also on her sense of identity.

I was inspired by our meeting to organise all of my photos into huge chronological albums (including printing pics from Facebook!), which was a massive reflective study in itself. I have a very odd sense of satisfaction about my life that was missing before, or felt chaotic. My past felt chaotic, like the random albums and boxes of loose pictures. All tidy now ... there is a logical story told in the albums, of an adventurous little girl that grew into a worldly woman. The chaos is gone. Thanks for being a big part of that.

Fortunately, this seems to have been a positive change, but it is also possible that participants might become distressed or anxious, or might change their practices in

problematic ways after spending a period of concentrated time discussing and reflecting on their personal history of photographic activity. While it has been argued that giving the participant agency over the topics of discussion and the photographs shared can reduce the likelihood of distress (Bates et al., 2017), I found that it was not a simple matter for participants to predict what they would choose to talk about or how they would react.

Another kind of reflexivity after the interview may be required to establish clarity in relation to the object of analysis. Is it, for example, the events described in the interview, the descriptions of those events or the interviews themselves? This might usefully be decided in relation to the area of enquiry or research question, and the epistemological position taken up by the researchers. Choosing one of these elements as the primary focus does not discount the others, but positions them as informing that focus. For example, one of my participants described a family holiday, during which he took some photographs. If the object of analysis is the described event (the holiday), then the interview in which that holiday was described becomes important contextual information, since it determines what of that past event is discussed, and thus reveals important points of emphasis and limitation. Similarly, if the object of analysis is the narrative of the holiday, then the social and material activity of the interview configures what is described and how. If the object of analysis is the participant's social and material activity within the interview (i.e. navigating and talking about photos), then that activity moves beyond context to constitute important elements for analysis, which structure the articulation of secondary, past events such as the holiday.

During analysis, I also needed to maintain awareness that the content of my interview transcripts was, in part, a product of what was looked at and how it was navigated. This was aided by taking notes on the material and social interactions during and immediately after each interview. These notes were referred to and added to throughout the analytic process so that the focus was not too much on the text-based records of verbal information in the transcripts, nor on the visual information present in the photographs. As I have noted, analysing visual or material elements in isolation of the social can lead to problematic positions in relation to conceptions of truth and meaning. A multimodal analysis (one in which consideration is given to the interactions that produced the transcripts and made sense of the photographs) can avoid the analysis becoming reliant on decontextualised readings of short transcript excerpts. This may be particularly useful if there are multiple members of the research team engaged in analysis. In my case, field notes acted as a glue that bound transcripts and photos into a multimodal conception of the interview.

It is worth noting that the kind of analysis I am advocating here can be onerous and time-consuming, and so it may be necessary to limit the overall sample accordingly. This is particularly the case for research in which the context of remembering (historical, cultural, technological, spatial) is taken seriously. However, even with a small sample, such research can ask important questions of traditional psychological understandings, and can inform the development of methods that complement more traditional approaches in important ways. In

psychology, it can help us to move beyond a focus on the isolated individual. People engage with photographs through acts that are social and communicative, and so one does not study photography by attempting to remove confounding variables, but by taking note of the context, recognising that it is not only unavoidable but essential. Thus, the interview can have a kind of social validity, not in spite of the researcher's intrusive role, but because of it.

However, the researcher must consider the backdrop of this engagement (i.e. the research agenda and approach, and the particular context of the research interview), because the environmental and social context in which interactions with visual materials take place matters. For example, the interviews I did in people's homes with *their* technology and *their* photo displays produced a very different context from those I did in the workplace. Similarly, the materials matter: looking at a photo on Facebook is different from looking in a physical album, which is different again from being presented with a bundle of photographs by a researcher. In this way, rich understandings of memory and photographic practices resist generalisation, especially when historical practices, culture and beliefs about memory, photography and technology are taken into account.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that photographs are not just images but elements of wider discursive and historically and culturally situated practices. They are engaged with through multimodal, social and material activity, and understood in relation to a range of interconnected practices of taking, sharing, organising and viewing. As such, analysing visual aspects (e.g. photographs) and verbal data (e.g. transcripts) in isolation from considerations of the interview as multimodal can lead to reduced conceptions of participants' acts of remembering within the research. Thus, theoretical precision is required in relation to how photography and remembering are understood, what is analysed and how that analysis is conducted, in order to create a sound basis for negotiating the contestable production of evidence and conclusions. While photo-elicitation interviews can create "a richer picture of the topic" (Reavey, 2012, p. 5), allow more participant agency, selectivity and reflection, they also present challenges for epistemology and reflexivity, requiring researchers to think through their assumptions of truth, representation and source evaluation. As challenging as this may be, such approaches can ask important questions of traditional psychological understandings, and can inform the development of methods that usefully complement traditional approaches.

## **Notes**

- 1 As Stanczak (2007) noted, despite the crucial role of photography in the emergence of positivism (linked to the systematic visual documentation of various phenomena), the rise of words in the form of text-based and verbal approaches, refined through dominant quantitative methods across the social sciences, saw a turn away from visual data.
- 2 Note that video recording could also be helpful here, not as a replacement for the analytic summary but as an additional opportunity for remembering and noticing social and



- material elements. The combined practical challenges of organising equipment, processing and storing video, and the time required to review the footage led me not to pursue this.
- 3 This is a particularly contestable notion in relation to digital photos, where there is no direct chemical reaction on the photographic material, nor any fixed photographic material, since digital photographs manifest on whichever device is used to access them (e.g. Mitchell, 1994). Whether they are displayed on a screen or printed on paper, digital photographs are produced from the reading of a file, not the chemical reaction of reflected light.
  - 4 Consider the progressive work of Harris and colleagues (2011) on shared remembering, or Brockmeier's (2019) revolutionary summary of collective remembering, both of which focus on social aspects of language, neglecting material interactions as integral elements of configuration.

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*The photo-elicitation interview*

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# IMAGE-BASED METHODOLOGY IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY IN BRAZIL

## Perspectives and possibilities

*Arley Andriolo*

### **Introduction**

In the 1990s, with what was termed the *pictorial turn*, a broad movement towards valuing images in the production of knowledge gained momentum, especially with the revision of the *linguistic turn* over the previous decades (Mitchell, 1994). The growth of visual methodologies represents their application in the research of this movement. Going beyond anthropology, which has studied photographs and films since the first half of the twentieth century, other disciplines in the social sciences have begun using images as a source of knowledge. However, at the end of the 1990s, many critics questioned the epistemological value of visual methods and, by extension, their status in the scientific field (Prosser, 1998).

In Brazil, the process was not very different. There was a notable increase in research based on visual methods in the 1990s (Koury, 1998), although with considerable debate over its credibility in the social sciences. In psychology, in the early 2000s, researchers pointed out the small number of studies based on photographs or videos (Neiva-Silva and Koller, 2002). Over this decade, relevant research based on images in psychology emerged. However, other researchers continued to mention the small number of publications in this area, compared to research based on interviews, conversations and discourse analysis (Justo and Vasconcelos, 2009).

Given the important advances in visual research in psychology in other countries (Reavey, 2011), it is worth assessing the contributions from Brazil in this area of research. Looking at research in psychology, we can observe that there is a growing number of references with respect to images, among which photography has been

the main instrument, followed by the use of camcorders. Recent collections show the diversity of experiences in studies using images (Dias *et al.*, 2009; Zanella and Tittoni, 2011; Reis *et al.*, 2015). We see the emergence of terms such as “self-image,” “body image” and “image and subjectivity” in dialogues with philosophy, anthropology and psychoanalysis, linked to words such as *see*, *look* and *participate*.

In this chapter, we provide a brief review of the bibliographic production in Brazilian journals dedicated to image-based research in social psychology over the last twenty years. The first part seeks to identify the main perspectives and approaches used in these studies. In the second part, we present three research models used by the Postgraduate Program in Social Psychology at the University of São Paulo’s Institute of Psychology, which represent some specific contributions. Among them, the following stand out: (1) use of several modalities simultaneously: poetry, painting, photography and video; (2) collaborative participation between researchers and members of the studied communities, using tours, workshops and encounters; and (3) the observation of belonging to a place, the community’s natural and cultural environment.

This area of research has received contributions from visual anthropology and sensory ethnography. Recognizing the image as a form of expression of otherness, as the “voice of the other,” opens up the possibility of understanding through sensory experience. Thus, the third part of this chapter seeks to demonstrate the importance of the concept of aesthetic experience; not by restricting aesthetics to the artistic field, but as a fundamental dimension in the production of meaning in everyday life, understood through images in the domain called “social aesthetics” (Berleant, 2010).

In summary, the conception of aesthetic experience proposed by Arnold Berleant moves away from the exclusive domain of the artistic field to consider the amplitude of sensible experience. As Berleant states (2000, p. 6), engagement “expresses the kind of perceptual involvement that extends beyond the conventional limits of art and into broader domains of human experience.” The aesthetic field is formed through images in a process of signification originating in sensory experience, but not in opposition to the social and cultural condition. The perception of images is a transaction engaging the observer’s body, situated in a natural and cultural environment.

One of Berleant’s main contributions to the contemporary debate is the study of aesthetics, referring to its etymological definition (*aisthesis*, perception through the senses), in a domain of experience in which we are bodily and environmentally engaged. The concept of engagement was presented initially in Berleant’s first book (1970) and later developed in *Art and Engagement* (1991), becoming central in his work.

Understanding aesthetic experience through the concept of engagement comes out of the criticism of the heritage of nineteenth-century aesthetic theories and the proposition of an environmental aesthetics as the foundation of social life and political action (Berleant, 2005). As we intend to demonstrate by the end of this chapter, this theoretical conception represents an important contribution to image-based research in social psychology. Among other authors, Berleant’s proposal was developed using Kurt Lewin and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in a “participatory

model” of experience, in such a way as to make possible the understanding of meanings experienced by the person in dynamic interactions in a lived environment.

### **The use of images in Brazil: some perspectives**

Brazil is a large country with very diverse traditions, especially in the field of science. The origins of social psychology in this country go back to 1935, when Raul Briquet taught a course at the Escola Livre de Sociologia e Política de São Paulo (Free School of Sociology and Politics of São Paulo). The same year, Arthur Ramos also taught a course in social psychology, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, and the content was published in the book *Introdução à Psicologia Social* (1936). Both of these professors were doctors, but they sought to delimit the object of social psychology between biology and sociology. Neiva and Torres (2011) point out that social psychology at that time included the study of the psychological bases of social behavior, psychological interrelations and the influence of the group on the individual.

Arthur Ramos noted the lack of precision of the object in social psychology. He grounded his understanding in a dialogue with anthropology (for example, Malinowski, Boas, Lévy-Bruhl). Ramos and Briquet emphasized the contributions of “behaviorism, psychoanalysis and gestaltism, addressing, in a similar manner, topics such as suggestion, imitation, sympathy, public opinion, censorship and propaganda” (Neiva and Torres, 2011, p. 32).

The vast dimensions of Brazil harbored very diverse influences on the development of the scientific field of social psychology, seen as an “archipelago” bringing together many islands, as characterized by Mariana Cordeiro (2017). Just to cite a few of the relevant approaches in the history of Brazilian social psychology, there were memory studies based on H. Bergson, social perception based on F. Heider and cognitive development based on J. Piaget, among numerous others.

The political and critical perspective is notable in the works of the Associação Brasileira de Psicologia Social (Brazilian Social Psychology Association) (ABRAPSO), where renowned researchers discuss research based on authors such as L. Vygotsky, T. Adorno and G. Deleuze, among others. During the military regime in Brazil (1964–1985), the political position of social psychology engaged in important dialogues with Latin American authors such as Martin Baró. There was a common interest among Latin American social psychologists to develop a social psychology with a historical basis, focused on conflicts among popular classes, “committed to the Latin American social reality” (Neiva and Torres, 2011, p. 34).

Although the use of visual methods is relatively recent in Brazilian psychology, one may recall that the use of images, drawings, paintings and photographs (among others) for understanding the mental world, or subjectivity, has a long history. For example, Mário Pedrosa’s 1949 thesis entitled *Da natureza afetiva da forma na obra de arte* (The Affective Nature of Form in the Work of Art) became a landmark in the

relationship between psychology and images by introducing Gestalt theory in Brazil, a few years before the publication of the famous book by Rudolf Arnheim.

Going back a little further, we find studies of images in psychology, especially in the field of psychopathology. Psychiatrists Franco da Rocha and Ulisses Pernambucano undertook the first studies of paintings and sculptures, based on the psychoanalytical approach, in the early twentieth century. A number of scholars shared this interest in psychoanalysis, as seen in publications such as *O simbolismo estético na literatura* (Aesthetic Symbolism in Literature), by Durval Marcondes (1926) and *A expressão artística nos alienados (contribuição para o estudo dos símbolos na arte)* (Artistic Expression among the Alienated (a Contribution to the Study of Symbols in Art)) by Osório Cesar (1929). The latter collected paintings, drawings and sculptures made by patients at the Hospital de Juquery, near the city of São Paulo, and interpreted them based on psychoanalytical principals, exhibiting these images, for the first time, in art museums.

Nonetheless, many of these researchers limited their work to describing the morbid processes of patients through the interpretation of images. The physician and student of Carl Jung, Nise de Silveira, criticized this understanding. In 1946, Dr. Nise da Silveira was working at the Engenho de Dentro Psychiatric Hospital in the state of Rio de Janeiro when she laid the foundations for a project that would later become the *Museu das Imagens do Inconsciente* [Images of the Unconscious Museum]. She created a studio where patients could freely paint and sculpt. The images that emerged were understood as the language of people whose possibilities for expression were limited by their illness and psychiatric internment. Silveira (1981) draws attention to the understanding of images, valuing the expressive qualities of the person. She challenges the policy of submission of images in medical discourse and reaffirms the recognition of language and communication of the other through images.

Here, the politics of images can be understood as political action that is, in large part, pre-reflexive, in the sense described by Merleau-Ponty (1999), in the daily acts of their authors in the lived world; a struggle that is not articulated in concepts or words, but rather in images. Furthermore, the work by Nise da Silveira reinforces the aesthetic character of interventions through images, mainly because it recognizes the corporal sensibility of patients in psychiatric hospitals and their expressive capacity. Her intervention project was clearly an image-based intervention using aesthetic experience. The image is not understood in an abstract manner, as the transmission of codes of a specific language, but rather the image is seen as part of the relations with the lived world and the participation of the body (Andriolo, 2014).

The influence of the work by Dr. Nise da Silveira reached social psychology, especially in the areas of mental health, public policy and the arts. This influence is notable for the critical and political perspective of its actions, rather than directly from Jung's concepts. In the social psychology of the arts, for example, we find an interest in the visual production of marginalized people, produced in psychiatric hospitals and mental health services facilities, but also the exhibitions of marginal artists (Frayze-Pereira, 1995).

Current visual methods preserve some traces of this history, and understanding it helps one to recognize the limits and possibilities of research on images in Brazilian social psychology. Even today, there are many questions about the meaning of images and their use among researchers, especially considering the diversity of research on discourse and narratives. Even when the object of study is the image, researchers often base their analysis on discourse. There is, then, an important question concerning the primacy of discourse analysis in the field of psychology; and, secondly, the need to inquire into the meanings of the image itself.

An important systematization of visual methods in Brazilian psychology was carried out by Lucas Neiva-Silva and Silvia Helena Koller (2002), delimiting the uses of photography in psychological research. The authors identified four modes for using photographic images: (1) record – the researcher or technician records a certain phenomenon for subsequent analysis; (2) model – the researcher presents photographs to study participants and investigates their perceptions and reactions to each one; (3) auto-photography – the participant takes photos to answer a question posed by the researcher, which usually addresses identity; and (4) feedback – the study participant is presented with photographs that the researcher or technician took of him or her in a certain situation.

Neiva-Silva and Koller (2002) focus on the auto-photographic method, originally proposed by Robert Ziller. This method uses photography as a starting point for a dialogue between the researcher and the person or group being studied. In this method, the photographic image is a mediation for processes established “outside” of it. This approach has been used both in clinical and social psychological research and emphasizes important terms such as “content” and “process,” which are articulated by the observation of the images and narratives of the participants. In another example, Adriana Bosco (2009) and her supervisor, Vera Paiva, adapted this methodology to examine how women perceive themselves and create their identity.

From the first studies using visual methodologies, two approaches emerged: taking photographs of study participants; or requesting them to take the photographs themselves. Using the first approach, Kátia Maheirie, Patrícia Boeing and Gisele Pinto (2005) photographed street cleaners and exhibited them, creating a space for dialogue and the valuing of these workers. Using the second approach, Vanessa Maurente and Jaqueline Tittoni (2007) gave cameras to street workers in their study. The researchers used the resulting “photo-composition” as an instrument for participant reflection, not as a mere record of the environment or themselves; the photograph as a medium of inscriptions: “The photograph could thus reveal what cannot always be described, and make visible aspects of their work that were ‘invisible,’ even to the workers themselves” (p. 35). In this way, they create a distinction between photography as a record and photography as an instrument of social intervention; that is, research does not seek what is *real*, but rather the production of realities and subjectivities by means of the photographic act.

Other authors focused their research on the field of visual culture, especially inquiring into the acts of *seeing* and *looking*. For example, Andréa Zanella (2006) endeavored to direct the discussion toward the theoretical by looking at aesthetic

perception in opposition to stereotyped perception. Zanella is rooted in a social and historical understanding of the act of seeing, in which perception is studied in relation to social models, especially according to Vygotsky. Her research was developed by examining educational processes. In the end, she proposes the use of the camera as an instrument capable of initiating a change in perception. The camera becomes an explicit tool for social intervention.

Leny Sato (2009) studied street markets and gave cameras to market vendors, asking them to record their work, friends, goods and so on. The images made up a set of data that, in conjunction with interviews, was used to analyze the structure of their social network. She examined the production of knowledge in the process of constructing visibilities expressed in both images and words. In her research, the camera plays a mediating role between researcher and study participants, providing a means to understand social values. In reference to Merleau-Ponty and Howard Becker, Sato concluded that the photographic image made it possible to make elements visible that were not visible and not spoken. The author called this action a “production of visibilities,” between looking and being looked at.

Joana Justo and Mário Vasconcelos (2009) provide us with research data based on photographic images by means of a methodological debate. In this debate, they examine photography as a research instrument, with its limits and possibilities, in the context of qualitative research. It is worth noting that they situate the problematic in the fields of contemporary communications and visibility. To this end, they introduce elements from visual culture, in which the methodology is applied, a fundamental fact often overlooked by researchers. In asserting that photography is a mediation in the production of meaning, they consolidate the idea of the image as an instrument of participation in research, together with the narratives shared between researchers and participants.

The researches cited emphasize the words “look” and “see” to indicate the role of the image as a mediation of processes for understanding psychic and social life. Thus, they underline the importance of visibility in psychological research. In addition, these studies emphasize the attitude of participants. In this sense, Justo and Vasconcelos (2009, p. 762) put forward the idea of participation as the axis for dialogue: “first, the neutrality of the researcher is deposed and, second, we try to give expression to the subjectivity of the participants.”

The work by Miguel Mahfoud’s research team contributed to this area of research by seeking to understand the image in a wider field. In addition to the use of the camera, their studies shed light on the meaningful images of a rural community and the reception of different images. In Morro Velho (city of Caeté, Minas Gerais, Brazil), religious traditions, celebrations and commemorations are fundamental events in the collective memory of residents. Mahfoud (2008) contextualizes the research with images in a historical and social perspective, according to a “dynamic of tradition affirming values and meanings, through colors and forms” (p. 583).

The research chose a specific image of the community, an altar created by a local resident for the church of Nossa Senhora de Nazareth and, based on a phenomenological and cultural methodology, sought to “compose” the meanings



of the image. The photograph initially appears as a record of this specific image, while the examination of the altar and the interview with the producer of the image allow us to understand the experience and the meanings that are important to the community, as elements of local identity.

It is possible to expand the scope of visual methodology, beyond the production of photographs or videos, by also examining images of art (or other images) that make up the cultural environment of the studied community. In this same project, a researcher investigated the collective making of a flag, mobilized by young people to value the local cultural and environmental heritage (Salum and Mahfoud, 2008). In addition, another researcher produced an exhibition of photographs and registered the responses of visitors. The photographs presented a record of traditional festivals and the daily life of residents (Araújo and Mahfoud, 2002). This research, based on phenomenology, provided results for the elaboration of personal experience and the work of collective memory, revealing specific structures of that cultural context, captured through different images.

The central elements of the Brazilian research demonstrate the importance of the debate on visual culture in specific social contexts, opening up room for questions about how visual methods can be applied to contemporary visual culture (Rose, 2014). Within this debate, the concepts of identity and memory appeared prominently, with which researchers approached fundamental forms of social interaction among groups, communities and collectivities.

Another important element concerns participation in research and the production of subjectivities. Generally speaking, Brazilian social psychologists support the interventive nature of these studies. The use of cameras and requesting subjects to produce their own images explicitly make clear to participants the active character of the research. In much of the research, participation is developed based on the relationship between the image and the narrative of the participants. In this regard, the studies are aligned with international research, where the focus on the process of producing meaning and community action are not separable (Hodgetts, Chamberlain and Groot, 2011). On the other hand, the interpretation of the iconic object itself has not gained prominence, either in an iconological approach or in the “psychology of images” (Forrester, 2002). Furthermore, specific concepts in image studies, such as “mimesis” and “happening,” have not been adequately developed.

At any rate, image analysis has become a relevant task in social psychological research in Brazil, coinciding with the emergence of the concern with understanding perceptions in social situations. Technological society requires the understanding of participants in situations of visibility, through the relationship with images and participation in research. The interpretation of images should not neglect the very meaning that these images have acquired in everyday life, both in our visual culture and in sensible experience.

### **Image, action and intervention: some possibilities**

The description of image-based research in Brazil, until now, has found that using camcorders is not as expressive as using photographic cameras. It has also been

observed that the research addresses specific populations and themes, but does not deepen our understanding of the sense of belonging to a place or region. The distinctions between environments and mobility through space have not been examined with deep attention in the image-based research in Brazilian social psychology.

To indicate specific research possibilities, three research projects were selected from the Postgraduate Program in Social Psychology of the University of São Paulo's Institute of Psychology. Each, in its own way, suggests a broadening of the field of investigation beyond the photographic camera, to return to specific places where images are collected as part of the research material, and to consider the contributions of mobility between spaces as relevant data.

In his doctoral thesis, Danilo Ide (2014) reviewed the use of videos in research, with reference to four possibilities: (1) as a record, adhering to the Kurt Lewin tradition, with the filming of behavior and social interaction; (2) as a model, with the use of video in studies on the choice of paths (walkability) and the perception of risk by pedestrians; (3) as auto-video, where video diaries serve as a basis for dialogue with participants; and (4) as feedback, used for didactic purposes, in learning and training programs, among others.

Ide's research (2014), conducted under the supervision of Professor Arley Andriolo, can be seen as a contribution to our understanding of mobility and the relationship with the environment in image research. At the core of this research is the concept of the body and its relations with others and the environment. In this project, Ide establishes a link with recent research on the intersection between *visual methods* and *mobile methods*. Current studies on mobility have studied museum visitors, street walks, walking trails in parks and the use of apps for travel and getting to know cities, among others (Ide, 2014).

His research involved the residents of the Liberdade neighborhood in the city of São Paulo. This neighborhood, once occupied by former slaves, was founded on the outskirts of the old town in the nineteenth century, but became the main choice for Japanese immigrants arriving in Brazil in the twentieth century. The objective of the research was to understand the meanings given to the neighborhood by residents through the use of camcorders. When he tried to give camcorders to the research participants, he noted a few important aspects concerning visual methods. The participants were not very comfortable doing the filming during the walks with the researcher. In addition, the content of the images was difficult to analyze, even in conversations with the participants, because the images were very shaky, not focused on specific points and did not make it possible to clearly recompose the walk itinerary.

Danilo Ide (2014) uses the term "peripatetic video" to refer to his work, because it promotes knowledge via displacement through space, like in the tradition of the ancient Greek school of philosophy. The peripatetic videos are not restricted to the visual field, since they capture the body's involvement in space in relation to the cultural and natural environment. It is not just about seeing the landscape, but also about walking, breathing, going up and down and moving through the landscape. The whole body is involved in the action and its mobility is

inscribed in the image, whether in pictures or video. In short, the experience of the environment and the experience of the image go beyond visual data. The research led to a philosophical understanding based on the active participation of the body, immersed in a specific environment, within the phenomenological tradition and the aesthetics of Arnold Berleant (1992).

In conclusion, Ide (2014) proposes a merging of Kurt Lewin's social psychology, particularly topological analysis, with the work of the British anthropologist Tim Ingold. Both allow us to move towards an understanding of images that involve the totality of the body lived in its environment. Ingold (2004) underlines the relevance of a more basic level of experience, focusing on the movement of the feet, steps, paths and trails, so that "the culture on the ground" enables one to understand "the ground of the social relationships." Ide concludes his research showing the importance of restaurants and places related to food as significant points on the walks. That is, the process of linking to, and identifying with, the neighborhood is part of the relationship between culture and eating habits, notable on the paths of residents.

Another relevant study was conducted by Luiz Otavio de Santi (2017) under the supervision of Professor Belinda Mandelbaum. He worked in a small town called São Luiz do Paraitunga, known for its historical and cultural heritage, in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. In 2010, the town suffered massive flooding and the river swept away many of the historic houses and resulted in the collapse of the town's main church of São Luiz de Tolosa, built in the eighteenth century. The research consisted of an intervention in the city involving workshops with images, especially photography and video. Underpinning this, the concepts of "trauma" and "loss" are organized in relation to the memory of the local population. The research was carried out with the participation of residents and the active production of images, which dealt with the flood, suffering and the challenges to overcome the disaster.

Luiz Otavio de Santi is a filmmaker, documentarian and film teacher. With this background, he was able to bring together psycho-social research procedures, and others from filmmaking, by designating the research as a "video-photographic intervention." We can highlight the following elements: collaborative research; a multi-modal methodology; and the debate concerning different media. In parallel to his thesis, Santi also made the documentary *Espaços da Memória* (Memory Spaces) with a team of professionals who interviewed the population, collected iconographic material and held workshops and debates and other actions. The workshops set people in motion, walking the streets of the town, identifying and recording significant places. From these actions emerge the collection of video images, photographs produced in the workshops and photographs from personal collections. In addition, it involved a musical group that composed and performed songs about overcoming tragedy.

In his thesis, Santi (2017, p. 48) places each of these sets of images in their own place and in dialogue with the collection: "The images produced by them served as a structure for the documentary script, which incorporated a selection of photos in the narrative." Thus, it advocates research as a collective production, emerging from the encounter between all these contributions, the multiplicity of ways of seeing.

The results of this thesis are not presented in a specific manner, as is the case with other research in social psychology, but in a set of propositions elaborated from the intervention through images. The authors cited are very diverse, including the philosophers Foucault and Deleuze, researchers of phenomenological aesthetics André Bazin and Merleau-Ponty and intellectuals dedicated to images and communication, such as Baitello and Belting. As mentioned above, in addition to the multi-modal methodology and the collaboration of the participants, the thesis presents a discussion on different media, where it provides a relevant contribution to social psychology. That is to say, the image cannot be treated as an abstract object in research, with no specific place in the world, because it is inscribed in an object, in a +?

Santi (2017) presents the “dispositive” as an area for research in social psychology. He looks to the debate on film in the 1970s to show that knowledge of the dispositive allows one to enter the world of images without abandoning the process of production and collaboration. In his words: “fixed pictures and multiple ways of seeing,” syncretic plots, the backstage and proscenium (Santi, 2017, p. 55). Thus, it informs the reader of the depth of images and the need for social psychology to confront our knowledge in this field.

The last study to be discussed is Denise Jorge’s thesis (2018), supervised by Professor Gustavo Martinelli Massola, about the neighborhood called Jardim Pedramar in the municipality of Jacareí, state of São Paulo. This research emerges from a critical view of welfarism and the notion of vulnerability. Jardim Pedramar is a place characterized by “social vulnerability,” lacking in urban infrastructure and basic public services, but with “depth of soul” qualities to confront this adversity. On the one hand, the author bases herself on Carl G. Jung and James Hillman, adopting the discussion about the nature of intervention in the community: an intervention via image would be a way to help the community to “cultivate the soul of the place” (Jorge, 2018, p. 197). On the other hand, she works with sensory ethnography, a methodology that involves the mobility of the researcher and the participants, moving through the neighborhood, entering houses, kitchens, walking through gardens and on sidewalks. References to Sarah Pink appear in the theses cited here, but in Denise Jorge’s research, they acquire a more relevant presence.

The researcher considered the “walking with video” exercise proposed by Pink (2009) as a means to capture external images and make internal images visible: “They could feel the place and give it meaning, create the place and make sense of the place” (Jorge, 2018, p. 198). In short, to walk, create the place and research are verbs associated with the same action: intervention. The results of this thesis do not identify specific meanings to be reported, but transformations in the participants’ perception and consciousness.

The theses cited have the following elements in common: (1) the simultaneous use of different modalities, poetry, painting, photography and video, aligned with multi-modal research, but with a focus on the image; (2) collaborative participation between researchers and members of the studied communities, using walks, workshops and encounters, considering the collective production of results; and (3) mobility and relations with space, as employed in the research, to articulate the experience with the natural and cultural environments of the communities.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the aforementioned studies engage in an important dialogue with anthropology. In particular, the visits to the Department of Social Psychology (IP/USP) by Jacques Ibanez-Bueno, professor at the Université Savoie Mont Blanc (Chambéry, France) and author of the book *Le corps commutatif: de la télévision à la visiophonie* (*The Commutative Body: From Television to Videophone*: 2016), encouraged the use of new technologies in social research, aligned with Sarah Pink's sensory ethnography. In a broader sense, in Brazil, the prolonged contact with indigenous groups, the recognition of the aesthetics of the poorer peripheral areas around large urban centers and the fight against racism by the black community developed a critical reflection on ethnographic descriptions, particularly in the relations with people from popular classes. Ethnography came to understand the image as a form of expression and mediation of otherness, recognized as a means to access and understand the voice of the other.

Among the scholars in this area, Professor Sylvia Caiuby Novaes published a series of studies on research among indigenous communities where the production of photographic images or videos became an object of reflection. For example, photography in the ethnographic journeys of Novaes appears as an intermediary instance of communication that expresses experience in a distinct manner that cannot be substituted by writing. First, in addition to illustrating a specific reality and giving voice to the participants, the photographs foster a broadening in the ways of seeing and registering this perception in two ways: "defamiliarization" and "memories." Second, with the possibility of immediately seeing the photographs taken with digital cameras, Novaes (2012, p. 280) affirms that the image creates a space for sharing experiences: "photography was also a means of non-verbal communication and sociability with the Hupd'äh [people], an element of exchange for the welcome they offered me."

### **Image-based research and social aesthetics**

The challenge noted by researchers using methods based on images has been the status of this form of research among qualitative studies. That is, there is a need for recognition of these methodologies. To this end, researchers must advance the use of images as illustrations or as secondary research data for the effective role of images in the production of knowledge. Thus, it is necessary to consider the specific meanings of images.

In Paula Reavey's synthesis (2011), image-based research looks at experience in a particular way because it allows for the organization of time and space dimensions in a different manner than research based on words:

In sum, visual research in psychology can bring to the fore the spaces and objects through which people experience themselves so that the various forms of selfhood reported (verbally) and shown (visually) are fully understood and immersed in the settings/spaces in which they occur.

(Reavey, 2011, p. 10)

The option in this text to adopt the expression image-based methodology rather than visual methods is due to the fact that we seek a broader dimension of the participants' perception of the research. The term *image-based methodology* appears in Prosser (1998), but has not been widely used, since visual methods became the main reference in this area of research. Brazilian research in social psychology has shown the need to consider the field of perception as a whole, beyond just the visual.

Faced with the task imposed by studying images, Brazilian social psychology participates in dialogues with sociology, history, the communication sciences and anthropology. Although the problematic of the image emerges in the sphere of visibility, in objects that require vision, the approach to this phenomenon requires a broader understanding of perception, within the scope of bodily experience, sensibility and the aesthetic process.

The word *image* has distinct meanings, which are striking between Portuguese and English. In the scheme presented by Mitchell (1986), image is defined between the iconic object itself (pictures, statues, designs, mirrors and so on) and the mental image (dreams, memories, ideas, metaphors). The body and the senses are at the center of this double process. In Portuguese, the word image designates these two domains, the physical and mental. In addition, the concept of image in Portuguese involves all the senses and draws the attention of the researcher to the involvement of the body in the experience of the various objects and processes of the research.

In the words of communication philosopher Norval Baitello Júnior (2005), in addition to being visual, images can be acoustic, olfactory, gustatory, tactile and proprioceptive. This conception of the image in Brazil has an important impact on social psychology. From the sensibility of the body, the image lies in a double domain, perceptible and imperceptible, beyond the visible and the invisible.

This interpretation is connected to Hans Belting's (2006) comprehension, formulated in German, in which *picture* and *image* are not distinguished in the word *Bild*. This lack of distinction maintains the connection between physical artifacts and mental images:

Images are neither on the wall (or on the screen) nor in the head alone. They do not *exist* by themselves, but they *happen*; they *take place* whether they are moving images (where this is so obvious) or not. They happen via transmission and perception.

(Belting, 2006, p. 6)

For this historian, the mental and the physical are two sides of the same coin in a dynamic process between the image, the medium and the body. He affirms: "The interaction of mental images and physical images is a field still largely unexplored, one that concerns the politics of images no less than what the French call the *imaginaire* of a given society" (Belting, 2006, p. 8).

In this sense, we could delineate the domain of the image in social psychology as the study of social processes in which the image is not only a physical-chemical

thing, but a movement of mediations between the iconic object, the body images and the mental images of the observers (Andriolo, 2018). Social psychology thus addresses the movements of transformation of the image between people, as an imagetic phenomenon in social life.

With these comments, we would like to consider the importance for image-based methodology of both the “pictorial turn” of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the more recent “sensorial turn,” but not by placing one in opposition to the other. Both share a wider field of research for social psychology. The research seeks to understand the involvement of the whole body in sensory experience in the social world, in a fundamental form of aesthetic engagement.

The philosophy of Arnold Berleant suggests a possibility for these studies:

Sensory experience is indeed central in aesthetic perception, and it receives even greater emphasis when we engage with environment. We not only *see* our living world; we move with it, we act upon and in response to it. We grasp places not just through color, texture, and shape, but with the breath, by smell, with our skin, through our muscular action and skeletal position, in the sounds of wind, water, and traffic.

*(Berleant, 1992, p. 19)*

Berleant’s philosophy proposes a revision of the notion of environment through a participatory model. On the one hand, the environment depends on the perception of the subject and, on the other, it imposes its features, resulting in a “relationship of mutual influence” through the intertwining of the lived body and the lived space. It is important to emphasize that this understanding was arrived at through two interrelated paths: the phenomenology of aesthetic experience and Kurt Lewin’s topological psychology:

Lewin’s topological psychology represents the framework in which events can occur within a life space. The magnitude of such events requires the use of the concepts of “psychological force” and “field of force”, and this led Lewin to develop a vector psychology. Lewin considered the psychological environment of an individual to directly govern behaviour.

*(Berleant, 2005, p. 10)*

For example, distance and direction are properties of this environment, working in favor or against a person’s movements. The “paths” or “barriers” within this lived space promote dynamic qualities and relate to a person’s reactions and motivations.

In addition to authors of psychology, the observation of artistic practices contributed to Berleant’s formulation of a “participative aesthetics.” The artistic images from the history of art offer important elements concerning the sensorial involvement of artists and spectators – the sensitive qualities of this type of engagement. With respect to the psychological field defined by Lewin, Berleant adds the sensitive qualities of the environment itself, acting through the body: “This means that the concept of environment must be altered to assimilate the

lived body on the one hand and broadened to embrace the social on the other” (Berleant, 2005, p. 16).

The concept of aesthetic engagement was developed at the interface between philosophical phenomenology and in John Dewey’s notion of experience. The engagement of the observer involves his or her entire body and promotes a dynamic between the “inner world” and the “outer world” through the relations between the environment, senses, emotions, cognition and mental images. These two worlds cannot be understood in a dichotomous manner, but as a dynamic and integrating interaction of a single phenomenon, a mixture, in the sense defined by Merleau-Ponty (1964).

From environmental aesthetics and the descriptive phenomenology of Arnold Berleant, the possibility of psychological studies being applied to a new domain emerges, designated as “social aesthetics,” which may be summarized in the following:

Social aesthetics may, in fact, *be* a kind of environmental aesthetics, for it is both needless and false to restrict environment to its physical aspects. No environment that we can know and speak about is without a human presence; such a thing, in fact, is empirically impossible.

Social aesthetics is, then, an aesthetics of the situation. But what identifies this particular kind of situation? Like every aesthetic situation, social aesthetics is contextual. Furthermore, it is highly perceptual, for intense perceptual awareness is the foundation of the aesthetic. At work in social aesthetics are factors similar to those in any aesthetic field, although their specific identity may be different.

*(Berleant, 2005, p. 156)*

## **Conclusion**

The brief summary of image-based research in social psychology in Brazil presented here shows the main perspectives and some possibilities. First, we note the growing interest in visual culture as an important element of the social context in which research is applied. Researchers investigate the different forms of sociability in groups and communities, in areas such as identity and memory. These studies are also considered as a means of intervention in communities, with the participation of residents and the production of subjectivities. We can highlight the importance of the conversations that connect image and narrative, both of which make up the data of the research. On the other hand, there have not been many studies that interpret the content of images, in the iconological sense, and we have not seen the development of concepts of iconic objects, such as *mimesis* or happening.

Secondly, we can observe three specific contributions from image-based research. In addition to the use of photographic cameras and camcorders, these studies seek to collect different images in the communities themselves, which have specific qualities of time and space. Thus, the image is understood in a broader sense, with the aim of capturing an expanded field of perception. In these studies,



different modalities are used simultaneously: poetry, painting, photography, video and so on, much like multi-modal research, but the focus remains the image. The participants are, in fact, research collaborators, participating actively in walks, workshops and encounters. In this way, the research results are produced collectively and raise questions about the best ways to disseminate knowledge. Finally, this research involves spatial displacements, considering mobility and relationships with the environment, both in relation to the natural environment and the culture of communities.

This summary leads to a proposition concerning the relevance of the concept of aesthetics beyond the artistic field (Berleant, 2010). This change in the focus of research seeks to reap the contributions of the pictorial and sensorial turn, placing social psychology in a trans-disciplinary context. Many image-based studies in psychology adhere to an approach informed by the communication sciences, using terms such as “sign,” “media” and “information.” By opting for research using aesthetic experience, the central concepts become “symbol,” “body” and “sensibility.” Both approaches seek to understand the meanings of images, but in different dimensions of experience (Andriolo, 2017, p. 159).

The aesthetic experience, understood through the engagement of the observer, makes one think of images through sensory activity, where primary meanings are situated. From this, the experience of nature and cultural objects is organized in different levels of signification. Social and cultural factors participate in the aesthetic experience from the beginning, in the relations between people, groups and social classes. At the same time as it informs the observer of its various meanings, the image is produced within cultural traditions and social tensions that give meaning to experience and produce meanings. The recognition of aesthetics in different social groups, among indigenous groups, in the poorer urban peripheries and the black community, among others, is a way of situating the voice of the other through the image, as an expression of otherness.

The final proposal of this text is to demonstrate the contribution that the notion of aesthetic experience can offer image-based methodology. Through the definition of social aesthetics, it seeks to establish the connection between aspects of social life and the sensible relations originating in the lived world. In summary, social aesthetics sees the entire range of social practices as an open field for the study of aesthetic experience, provided it is understood on its preliminary, sensory and meaningful level: gestures, walks, clothing, fashion, the shared forms of knowledge and the sensible constitution of communities, among other elements. It is the common ground of experience as a field of knowledge to be shared.

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# IMPRESSIONIST REFLECTIONS ON VISUAL RESEARCH IN COMMUNITY RESEARCH AND ACTION

*Darrin Hodgetts, Kerry Chamberlain and Shiloh Groot*

Earlier chapters, and published work, have noted that the use of visual methods within psychology is informed by established traditions in visual ethnography, sociology and geography (Ali, 2018; Cox *et al.*, 2015; Garrett, 2010; Harper, 2012; Pink, 2012, 2013; Rose, 2016). Such research often combines insights from photographs and words to explore the textures of participant lifeworlds and how people negotiate what they see and know (e.g. Ford and Campbell, 2018; Papaloukas *et al.*, 2017; Shankar, 2014). This chapter emerges out of our ongoing community research into homelessness using photo-production techniques (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2007b, 2008). The project is informed through broader social science traditions in order to investigate interrelated social psychological dimensions of homelessness, including identity, interpersonal relationships, the use of public space and resilience. Visual methods provide a basis for understanding the hardship faced by homeless people in relation to situational, societal, material and relational contexts. Photography is proving useful for aiding our participants to show us what these hardships and associated circumstances look like and feel like. It also provides a useful basis for working with journalists, governmental officials and agencies trying to render assistance.

The field of visual research has developed substantially over recent years, becoming increasingly complex and interdisciplinary, and more advanced theoretically, influenced by the recent 'turns' in social science to practice, place, emotion and mobility, as well by the development of technologies (Ali, 2018; Cox *et al.*, 2015; Garrett, 2010; Harper, 2012; Pink, 2012, 2013; Rose, 2016). However, in this chapter we have chosen to focus on the core of visual work based

in community research and engagement, using photo-voice and photo-elicitation. We discuss the use of these techniques in community-based participatory research, where they have commonly been used for showing deprivation to those in power and lobbying for change (Copes and Lunsford, 2017; Gariglio, 2015; Graham *et al.*, 2018). This tradition is useful for bringing the perspectives of minoritised groups to the fore and is a powerful means of initiating change through facilitating dialogue between various stakeholder groups (Gubrium and Harper, 2013).

It is fruitful to approach visual artefacts produced and used by participants in research as mimetic objects that reflect the human propensity to create things that reproduce in some ways, approximate and mimic aspects of their circumstances, experiences and everyday practices (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2018). We show how our participants engage in picturing practices in order to render aspects of their lives and hardships tangible for people living very different lives. This is an important point for work on topics such as homelessness. As Benjamin (1940/2002, p. 517) notes:

For what do we know of street corners, curb-stones, the architecture of the pavement – we who have never felt heat, filth, and the edges of stones beneath our naked soles, and have never scrutinized the uneven placement of the paving stones with an eye toward bedding down on them.

Images allow us to go at least some way to bridging this gulf in experience and understanding between homeless participants and housed scholars and our readers.

However, much of this research invokes potentially problematic assumptions about the concept of voice, largely in regard to assumptions about representation and transparency. In presenting this discussion, we are concerned not to simply offer a critique of community research involving the use of images but to develop a richer conceptual basis for such work. In light of this, there are two parts to the chapter. The first considers the origins of photo-voice, the role of voice and the importance of Freirian notions of dialogue in understanding what participants deliver through using the technique and its value for supporting social change. The second considers the process of picturing and how this can inform understandings of photo-production and associated efforts on the part of homeless people, psychologists and community service providers to effect change.

### **Considering photo-voice**

Photo-voice involves efforts to include the voices of people, often those who are minoritised from decision-making processes that shape their lives. It has emerged in applied and politically engaged areas of psychology, where a critical stance implies more than opposition to positivism and internal critiques of our discipline. Criticality also involves social action aimed at promoting inclusion and equity. The notion of giving voice comes from frustration on the part of psychologists engaged in challenging the exclusion of people from civic life and decision-making processes in society. Unfortunately it can lead to a romanticisation of minoritised people and

to an anti-expert stance towards scholars, which promotes the idea that research participants are the only experts. This is an issue that can be addressed by keeping the theoretical roots of the method in frame and paying more attention to the act of making photographs or picturing.

Photo-voice is informed by Freire's (1970/1993) work on critical consciousness raising and community-based action research approaches to social transformation (Mannay, 2015; Van Auken *et al.*, 2010). Freire developed an approach to education that conceptualised teachers and learners as co-constructors of knowledge. He shifted power relations in education from a sermon-type approach to a conversational approach involving the mutual exploration of topics. This egalitarian orientation saw insight and knowledge as the product of joint introspection and exploration fostered through dialogue.

Freire (1970/1993) outlined three levels of understanding and engagement with reality that members of minoritised groups can be guided through. At the *magical-conforming* level people are paralysed by feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. They see the status quo as natural and inevitable and therefore do not question or challenge it. Their adaptation to adversity allows them to survive, but their passivity contributes to continued oppression. At the *naïve-reforming* level, people focus on the corrupt nature of the status quo. However, instead of challenging the status quo and injustice, they engage in in-fighting and blaming peers for the situations in which they find themselves. The *critical-action* level involves people reflecting on the ways in which ideologies of oppression shape their understandings of their own situations and actions. People become aware of their own role in accepting or challenging the status quo. At this level, collective action is more likely and civic engagement can occur.

In facilitating the movement of illiterate South American peasants through these varying levels of consciousness, Freire attended to their daily practice as a site for the reproduction of social injustices. He used techniques such as drawing exercises to link such practices and emotional experiences to broader processes of oppression, and to encourage reflection and dialogue. Through these techniques, alternative understandings were cultivated as a basis for enhancing capacity to change and improve the world. Freire emphasised that such social change requires a combination of insights from actual experiences and daily life, along with more abstract academic understandings of the social processes shaping such lives.

These ideas were taken up by Wang and Burris (1994) in developing photo-voice methodology to assess the needs of rural Chinese women. This research drew upon auto-photography, where people take photographs of their daily activities and participate in follow-up photo-elicitation interviews and workshops to discuss their photographs. Photographs, drawings and stories were elicited from the women as a way of raising community concerns, identifying underlying influences and working through possible courses of action to address these concerns. Photo-voice enhanced participant reflexivity and contributed to participant knowledge of, and efforts to enhance, their own lives (cf. Klitzing, 2004). Photo-elicitation interviews based upon photographs allowed participants to show as well as to tell the researchers about their experiences (cf. Radley and Taylor, 2003; Vigurs and Kara, 2017). The approach provides opportunities for participants to have more

substantially engaged interactions with researchers that contribute to revealing deeper and richer information about daily existence than often comes from traditional one-off semi-structured interviews (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2007a).

As a methodology, photo-voice provides one means of documenting ways in which participants make sense of how and where they live, and the opportunities and constraints on their existence. Photography projects are designed to engage in active dialogue and listening, provide opportunities for critical reflection to occur and provide a basis for developing action strategies. They provide a means for engaging with, and building interventions out of, everyday experiences, a process that can enhance the usefulness of the resultant interventions.

Nowell and colleagues (2006) discussed neighbourhood renewal projects and their efforts to capture people's understandings of physical and social environments as a basis for fostering a sense of place, mutual support and health. They used photo-voice to bring out the physical and social qualities of a neighbourhood, and to encourage reflection and group dialogue. The method was deemed appropriate for tapping into the lived realities of participants and allowing them to raise personally important issues, and for empowering them to improve the setting. The authors proposed that photo-voice was useful because success with renewal initiatives is more likely if the strategies that psychologists employ are based on in-depth understandings of community settings and the everyday experiences and needs of the people living within those places. As is typical of photo-voice projects, participants were trained over two evenings about the goals of the research and the ethics of photographing others. A professional photographer took them through basic photographic techniques. Participants carried cameras with them for five weeks and shot a roll of film each week. They were asked to select three images from each roll and communicate the meaning of these in response to framing questions concerning their lives and relationships with others, and what needed to change in the community. Participants attended weekly group reflection sessions where these themes were discussed in an effort to strengthen place-based affiliations and commitment to community renewal.

We have some reservations regarding the emphasis placed on 'giving voice' to minoritised people in such projects. Although the perspectives of participants are essential, they should not displace academic interpretation, as is proposed by some community psychologists using the mantra that the participants are the experts. The emphasis on giving voice can lead to losing sight of the emphasis that Freire placed on the co-construction of knowledge. For Freire (1970/1993), the voices of minoritised people are problematic sources of knowledge that should not be taken at face value and require interpretation. The voice of a participant is negotiated in dialogue with the practitioner/researcher. For Freire, dialogue is an essential epistemological process in learning about social power and exclusion and how to respond to it. Dialogue can facilitate the interweaving of everyday experience and theoretical insights into broader societal processes; it can enhance reflection, understanding and action through a process of walking forward together while questioning. Putting cameras into the hands of participants is a productive way of facilitating such collaboration between researchers and participants in the sense-making process (Bukowski and Buetow, 2011; Hodgetts *et al.*, 2007a). However, participant training exemplifies how researchers are not simply

giving voice to participants. Training is itself a dialogical process that influences the very nature of the photographs and accounts people produce, potentially limiting the raising of issues unanticipated by the researcher.

As a social process in research, making photographs does not provide direct access to everyday life; what is deemed worthy of photographing is subject to social conventions and norms around what is important and acceptable to show, and what a project is about (Bourdieu, 1990). The relationship between participants and pictures is mediated by the expectations of dominant social groups and the imaging practices of cultural institutions, including the news media (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2007a). For example, our homeless participants reflect upon efforts to convey their concerns in the context of media images already circulating in society (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2006). This raises questions about the transparency of 'giving voice', as participant attempts to show and articulate experience are mediated by these social conventions. Participants often refer to difficulties in displaying alternative images that depart from common media characterisations. It is through these tensions, between needing to comply with social expectations to communicate effectively and the desire to represent oneself on terms that seem more relevant to one's everyday reality, that participants explore photographically what it means to be homeless (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2006). Their engagement with the ways homeless people are represented by the media opens a space within which they speculate about who gets to frame homelessness, its impact on their lives and what can be done about it. This issue was important because our participants often picture the mundane, 'boring' and inherently 'pointless' aspects of street life as a strategy for deconstructing the overly dramatised images dominant in news reports (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2005). This constitutes a further dialogical level, emerging when participants discuss their photographs with researchers and deconstruct and challenge imaging conventions that can limit what they show.

As social products that reflect dialogue and different voices, photographs also provide materials for engaging officials and those in positions of power with a view to creating change (Wang *et al.*, 2000). In the process, links between lives, local contexts, society, history and culture are drawn into the research and community advocacy processes. If the dialogical construction of homelessness, and how communities might respond to it, extends out to a societal level through media deliberations, then surely we should involve homeless people's reconstructions in such dialogues. Below, we illustrate how photo-voice can extend to such advocacy work via news media.

Hodgetts and colleagues (2008) investigated links between the representational space offered by newspaper portrayals of homeless men's use of a public library and their lived interactions in the library. This research was conducted in response to an item in a local newspaper raising concern about the appropriateness of homeless men being present in the city library. The item promoted the exclusion of homeless men by emphasising the deviancy of these men and the danger they supposedly posed for housed citizens. Our participants raised the issue of library access and the controversy in their talk and also through their photographs (Figure 30.1). They responded to the news item by emphasising their 'appropriate' use of the library for reading and learning, and as a means of escaping disruptive practices, such as drinking in public, which were situated beyond the library.





Figure 30.1 Photograph of the public library entrance by Roger.

*Roger:* It's where I spend my day. It's really cool. I learn a bit of history and read a few books there ... There's a video and TV upstairs ... right where the archive is and I watch a few documentaries up there ... It's good to be off the street for a while to relax and do what everyone is doing. I can get to know people who go to the library without annoying them ... It's not a big deal, but it's good to be able to go in there sometimes and just be somewhere.

Participants presented the library as a place to engage in positive relationships with housed people. One participant made a photograph of a librarian outside the library showing 'the place and the person' and then discussed the photograph as depicting the importance of relationships occurring there:

*Luke:* That's a friend of mine at the library. We weren't allowed to take a photograph in the library unfortunately. And she's been like a backbone for me ... I see her in there and we sit down and chat for a while and she checks on how I am and we talk about all sorts of nothingness. It's just a lovely sense of someone who has their eye on me and who thinks positively about me. There's a really good caring streak to her and they're the type of things we underestimate a huge amount in life. And sometimes the most important people are those who speak kindly to us from time to time.

These comments raise the importance of interactions with library staff and patrons in supporting a sense of belonging, respite and refuge among homeless people. We used such photographs in a presentation to library and other city council staff to emphasise the importance of the library for homeless people. Discussion went on for two hours and functioned to reinforce support for the continued inclusion of all citizens in the library.

We also conducted further fieldwork in which we interviewed library staff and patrons, and worked with journalists on follow-up material to produce an alternative account of homelessness and library use. The result was a two-page feature article that foregrounded the positive function of spaces like libraries in homeless men's lives and challenged the previous account advocating the exclusion of 'the homeless' from prime public spaces. It introduced the opinions of homeless men, librarians and city staff on the issue, and documented how the library allowed homeless men to engage in academic pursuits and provided a space for them to move beyond the stigma of a homeless identity. It discussed the broader functions of libraries in homeless men's lives, as a space for safety, social participation and respite from a life predominantly lived alone in marginal spaces, and challenged the assumption that these men were dangerous. It included comments by housed library patrons who were more compassionate towards the homeless men, and raised the importance of interactions with library staff and patrons in caring for homeless men. Calls to exclude these men from the library were subsequently dropped, and the men's sense of place was restored.

The production of photographs can lead to the articulation of critical questions, here regarding relations between homeless and housed people, and who is included and excluded from public spaces. The library study illustrates how photo-voice methodology can be extended through media advocacy to bring such political issues to the fore and as a basis for challenging exclusionary practices. The library example also emphasises how critical consciousness raising is important but needs to be linked with action, either on the part of minoritised people themselves or with those willing to get involved. What is clear for us is that we cannot simply locate responsibility for action with 'the homeless' because they are not necessarily in control of their homelessness. Many decisions shaping their situations are made beyond their lifeworlds and it is up to us, as critical scholars working with community groups, to help bridge this divide through advocacy and joint action. The use of photographs is important in this context because it renders the situation real and can be used to raise questions at different levels of the socio-political system that perpetuates homelessness.

### **Considering the picturing process**

Now we extend our consideration of what people do when asked to picture and discuss their worlds during photo-production research projects. We examine this from three perspectives; picturing processes in the making of photographs, the co-construction of the meaning of images between participants and researchers and the re-construction of photographs and their meanings in community practice and intervention.

Picturing, the making of photographs, involves an active engagement on the part of participants with the themes of the research as manifest in their lifeworlds. Looking at one's world with a view to making photographs orientates participants to the material aspects of their everyday lives, to artefacts important to them and to the relationships that give meaning to these places and things (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2007a). The resulting pictures and associated accounts provide insights into the practices through which people construct themselves as social beings within specific locales, and enable us to link personal lifeworlds to wider societal contexts. If people make, rather than take, photographs (Barthes, 1981), these constructive processes of picturing are foundational to understanding photo-voice.

Participants often produce photographs that attest to the existence of relationships and encounters, and the importance of events and locations, whether displayed in the frame or not (cf. Harrison, 2004a). Elsewhere (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2007a), we have proposed that to understand photographs provided by participants we must contemplate the scenes, events and relationships that lie beyond the frame, and even look to photographs that were never taken (see also Frith, Chapter 5, this volume). This is particularly crucial because photographs have leaky or fuzzy frames that lead us on to considerations of things not fully evident, lying off to the side of the depiction.

Rather than see photographs as bounded objects for interpretation, Radley and Taylor (2003) propose that photographs are better understood as standing in a dialectical relationship with the persons who produce and discuss them. From this perspective, the meaning of a photograph does not lie in the material object, except insofar as this is part of the way that people talk about them. It is when we engage with and discuss photographs that we impute meanings into the image. In discussing the 'dialogical image', Benjamin (1982) proposes that processes of picturing allow people to surface and reflect upon taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life, and that the meaning-making processes are not necessarily restrained by the time and place of a particular photograph's creation. To reflect upon the photographs one has made is to explain and interpret the depictions (cf., Harrison, 2004b). From this perspective, picturing is not simply a technical process for producing material objects containing set meanings. Photographs can be seen as efforts at communication that are open to interpretation and various uses within ongoing social interactions (Bourdieu, 1990). In this way photographs comprise things that people can use to represent events, places, persons and relationships; they can explain and show (cf., Brookfield *et al.*, 2008). The meaning of a photograph is thus more fluid and variable in response to the changing circumstances of the photographer, the viewers, and what is being done in the interaction between them. Reflecting this line of thought, Harrison (2004b) notes that 'Meanings of photographs will change, and the processes of memory, history making, narration and self-actualisation, are ongoing features of personal and social relations with photographs' (p. 25).

There is, however, a risk in focusing on the process of producing and exploring pictures. We might fall into the trap, evident in some variants of discourse analysis,

of looking at how accounts are constructed rather than engaging with their meaning and sustaining a focus on their value for community action. We propose that a focus on the processes of construction, meaning making and community action should be inseparable. When participants produce photographs and discuss them with researchers, they critically reflect on their situations (Radley and Taylor, 2003) and produce artefacts that can be used to plan change. Photo-based interviews can thus be thought of as conversations between respondents and interviewers about and around the specific scenes and how to respond to the concerns these raise.

As interpretive practice, this is similar to Mitchell's description of representation as something assembled over time out of fragments and constituting an ongoing assemblage of insights woven together into an account (Mitchell, 1994). This perspective holds a key insight for avoiding simplistic notions of giving voice, and necessitates that researchers and change agents consider more than an understanding of photographs. It necessitates an understanding with the participants based on their efforts to picture their lifeworlds (Guillemin and Drew, 2010). Such an orientation involves tuning into conversations that extend beyond the photograph to an interpretative process involving 'looking at' and 'looking behind' the picture (Wright, 1999, echoing Barthes, 1981). This encompasses researchers and participants both looking at and behind from their different positions to determine the significance of the depiction for the research. In its most straightforward form, a participant might photograph an entrance to a library and then move, in discussion with the researcher, beyond this depiction to talk about why he goes there and the social relations shaping his access. These insights might then be used for lobbying, including through news media, to ensure continued library access for homeless people. It is common for photo-production participants to offer stories that take off from photographs, moving well beyond the depiction, and raising issues about the history of depicted events, relationships and places (cf. Harrison, 2004a). These accounts can take us somewhere very different from the location or relationships depicted in the photograph.

Further, participants can continue to picture an experience when reflecting again on a photograph made and discussed on a previous occasion. They can recount or reconstruct a possible past that is open to further negotiation and reconstruction as the person reflects on their contemporary life position (Harrison, 2004b). In the process, photographs can be re-described *as if* they were new photographs in the making. This is a crucial point because photographs are at once material artefacts and objects and memories to be recast through dialogue and further reflection. Hurdley (2006) found that people talk about objects displayed in their homes as if these represented their character and the relationships they hold dear. The meaning of these objects was not seen as fixed or static; the accounts people gave of objects depended on the aspects of self they wished to display and communicate in the context of the interaction and who they were engaging with. Personal things are invested with history and tradition, and often crystallise connections with other

people and places. The retelling of the significance of an object invokes a nexus of meaning and relationships that exceeds the materiality of the object and invokes shared relations. Hurdley (2006, p. 721) notes that:

Their materiality is not bound by temporal and spatial limits, since they are the material with which people build stories of absent presences, a horizon beyond which the past and future, the otherworld and ideal self dwell ... Objects were not only props to life histories but essential players; we were host and guest, yet also presenter and listener, judge and defender. The narrative was doing work, often in allowing the teller to display other worlds in an otherwise limited environment.

In discussing the ways in which a particular participant narrated an object, and in the process, herself, Hurdley (2006, p. 726) states: 'Her performance is an investment not only in the narrative, which in a sense is a memory of past action, but also in her present self. Past and present are thus literally materialized in the frame'. Discussions of photographs can also contain future intentions and actions not yet taken, such as leaving the street.

The idea of understanding homelessness *with* participants can also form the basis for working with service providers. Understanding the transitions occurring in homeless people's lives is crucial, and a focus on picturing can be used to foreground the agency of homeless people as they attempt to make their way in the world, and also to inform the practices of service agencies. For instance, as part of a project on urban poverty (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2014) we used several case studies in workshops with agency social workers to encourage a broader understanding of why some interventions to assist homeless people to move off the streets are not working long-term. Below we discuss one such case to illustrate its potential for enhancing understanding and efforts for change. This case takes a longitudinal approach, allowing us to explore the complexities of a person's experiences of homelessness across both a range of settings and changed circumstances.

Joshua is a 45-year-old man who has had ongoing experiences of living on the street over the last four years. On our initial contact, Joshua had just come off the street and was entering a 'detox' programme, trying to address his alcohol and drug addiction problems. Over a period of 12 months, Joshua produced and discussed four sets of 27 photographs with us. These sets spanned his time in detox, a period when he was re-housed, and a later period back living on the street. They reflect key transitions in a homeless person's life that raise important issues about, and present insights into, the problems facing homeless people in resettlement.

In making the first set of photographs, a member of the research team accompanied Joshua on a tour of his street life, and he explained the significance of each photograph as it was made. In these photographs, Joshua took us into the hidden world of homeless people, producing several photographs of the private spaces in which they dwell (Figure 30.2), drop-in centres in service agencies and



*Figure 30.2* Homeless sleeping spot with poetry inspired by 'The Borg' (*Star Trek*).

abandoned buildings. This is the underworld of homeless people, from which they step out to beg on the streets, rummage through bins and squeegee car windows. Joshua wanted to portray what being homeless looked like. In the subsequent sets of photographs, we move out from this private domain into a more public arena.

The second set marked an important transition for Joshua, from the street to supported housing. When asked to image his life for a second time, Joshua had less idea of what to show us. He settled on presenting a perspective of domiciled life evidenced in public spaces. These are images of a city populated by housed people (Figure 30.3), from whom Joshua is separated socially. This is the sanitised world of domiciled living in the city, beyond homelessness and, from his perspective, a somewhat Disneyfied world<sup>1</sup> (Amster, 2003). These images communicate the perspective of a man who is not participating in city life; Joshua is lost.

The third set was taken in a period when Joshua was transiting back on to the streets. In this set, the series of photographs depict interactions between homeless and housed persons. Here, lifeworlds overlap and collide in shared urban space. The set includes aspects of street life, such as an intoxicated 'streetie' asleep on a park bench and police regulating the activities of beggars. This set constitutes a visual diary of a typical day on the street for Joshua. It also conveys his use of creative signs when begging to gain resources (Figure 30.4) that he shares with members of his street family, and out of which he builds relationships.



Figure 30.3 Domiciled life on the streets of Auckland.



Figure 30.4 Joshua begging outside a McDonald's outlet in Auckland.

*Impressionist reflections on visual research*

*Joshua:* My signs are a wee bit different. They're things like, 'Ninjas abducted family, need money for kung fu lessons,' and uh what else is it ... I'm on eBay for them apparently; quite a few people come past and recognise me ... another one is, 'I'm starving and so is the idiot holding me', um 'Aliens abducted family, need money to build spaceship', and things like this ... it's all money-makers ... .

*Interviewer:* Why do you put that spin on it?

*Joshua:* Because they're different and people actually come past and see them and it gives them a giggle. You know, instead of just the normal homeless bullshit that everyone's used to.

The fourth set depicts homeless people occupying prime public spaces and socialising together (Figure 30.5). At this time, Joshua is re-embedded in street life.

While Joshua found it easy to articulate and picture street life, the same could not be said for his (brief period of) housed life. He found it difficult to identify with the housed setting, where he was like a fish out of water. From his acts of picturing and talking about his world, we are able to develop an understanding of what homelessness means for Joshua. Across the photographic sets we gain insights into how he is actually more at home when living on the streets with his street family. Joshua acknowledges that: 'Ninety per cent of the boys who get places end up back on the street anyway. If I slip and get back on the piss it will happen'. In fact, Joshua never really left the street. Re-housing actually



*Figure 30.5* Joshua back with his street family.



constituted a rupturing of his daily life and rendered him dislocated in an alien environment for which he was poorly equipped. We need to be aware that, when re-housed, homeless people may not have actually left street life, and the work of agencies remains incomplete. We can also recognise here the positive side of living on the street, with its advantages for the homeless person. Too often, professionals can lose sight of these positive benefits and focus too strongly on the negative effects of street life.

Here, the act of picturing – conceptualising and trying to make specific pictures and talk about them – is shown to be important for the agency of homeless people, and the articulation of their experiences and how we might respond to their concerns. Cases such as Joshua’s illustrate the complexities of working to address homelessness. We do not resolve homelessness by using photo-production exercises, but we can develop better, more grounded understandings of homelessness and insights into homeless people’s lives from their use. These can facilitate change at a personal level through the engagement in critical reflection and dialogue, and at an institutional level through the use of the images to enlighten and engage people with the power to help. Our use of photography in this community-orientated research is informed by Freire’s notion of praxis, informing theory with experience and practice with theory.

## **Discussion**

We use visual materials in our research to open up liminal spaces for dialogue (Watkins and Shulman, 2008) or witnessing (Seedat, 2017), where decision makers with limited experience of homelessness can be repositioned as caring people who share a common humanity with homeless people. We draw on the concept of sondering as particularly pertinent to our argument here about the creation of liminal spaces. To sonder is to realise and recognise the richness of the lives of other people and their humanity. As Koenig (2014, p. i) notes:

the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own – populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness – an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you’ll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk.

Sondering requires us to slow down and take time to consider the humanity of homeless people and one’s own privileges that are often taken for granted, such as having a home.

Our thinking here is in keeping with that of Seedat (2017), who proposes a dialectical humanistic ethos for South African psychology. This work is particularly important for community research that employs visual methods in projects aimed at

investigating and responding humanely to poverty issues, such as homelessness. Our use of visual materials from our participants in sessions with other groups has important aims – to encourage the reduction of social distance between groups, witnessing, emotional immediacy, empathy and consciousness raising. We also work to [re] position audiences as compassionate and concerned citizens. In taking this approach, we see our role as one of developing impressions of the underlying societal significance of local events for a society in motion (Simmel, 1900/1978/2004). We do this by capturing fleeting moments through the use of visual methods in order to consider the social relations and structures at play in shaping these particular scenes. Images are invaluable in such efforts to cultivate human-centred ways of knowing homelessness and challenging inequitable social structures.

In many respects, we have come to understand research, including the use of visual methods, from a perspective similar to that of early impressionist painters and early impressionist social scientists, such as Georg Simmel (Davis, 1973; Frisby, 1981). These impressionist artists focused on everyday subject matter and worked to move our gaze with broad strokes from local scenes out to the social universe at play in situated happenstance. This understanding is also central to our work, where we seek to offer visual impressions of everyday poverty that convey participant experiences and encourage empathetic reactions. Like impressionist painters, we aim to offer readers an overall *impression* of the dynamics of everyday poverty. The value of such impressions resides in offering more affluent audiences, who have not experienced poverty themselves, awareness and insights that enable them to understand and empathise with people living in poverty. In producing such impressions, we move constantly between specific descriptions of depicted local scenes, people and objects, and theoretical abstractions that take us into more general arguments about the everyday impoverished situations in which our participants find themselves. The result is an intensified picture of actuality that is comprised, at least metaphorically, of incomplete brush strokes that hint at, rather than capture, everyday poverty.

This chapter exemplifies our developing impressionist orientation in relation to the use of visual exercises designed to aid our participants in sharing their experiences of poverty with us and others. These activities are designed to allow participants to ‘show’ and ‘tell’ us about their everyday lives (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2007a). Instead of viewing the resulting drawings or photographs as hard ‘data’ that conveys set, concrete evidence of reality, we view these materials as offering incomplete insights that hint at, but can never fully capture, what everyday poverty is like. In this chapter we have demonstrated how the mimetic objects produced by our research participants can be understood as empirically valuable agentive efforts to re-assemble, mimic, imitate, approximate, partially express and render more tangible their experiences of hardship and the material ramifications of inequitable social structures (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2018).

## Note

- 1 Disneyfication refers to the process by which the public face of cities is increasingly transformed to reflect a Disney theme park, which appears clean and pristine on the outside, but which hides dirt and exploitation on the inside.

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# POLYTEXTUAL THEMATIC ANALYSIS FOR VISUAL DATA

## Analysing visual images

*Kate Gleeson*

Over the last ten years, following a burst of enthusiasm in psychology for developing and using analytics for visual data (Frith, Riley, Archer and Gleeson, 2005), most researchers still tend to use the visual to elicit data rather than attempting to analyse visual data itself. Many of us find photo-elicitation to be a dynamic tool that aids communication and reflection in the interview process, enabling deeper reach into sensitive and abstract topics, and with participants who find the interview itself a challenging environment (King, Williams and Gleeson, 2017). However, the urge to analyse visual data is growing, particularly within disciplines that examine the production of identity, dress, appearance and visibility (Kaiser, 1997). Ten years ago this was evident in health psychology, where appearance and visible difference were explored (cf. Rumsey and Harcourt, 2005). More recently direct visual analysis is often incorporated into multimodal analyses, for example by Farren Gibson, Lee and Crabb (2015), who couch analysis of visible difference on breast cancer websites within an epistemology of critical discourse analysis. I would argue that setting down an approach for polytextual thematic analysis for visual data has allowed researchers to incorporate this approach into more complex and increasing polytextual approaches to the data and has opened up the potential of visual analysis for a range of epistemological approaches. Asserting that the processes involved in interpretation of visual text and lingual text are basically the same (bringing one set of texts to bear on another in order to make meaning) has proved liberating for researchers who wish to include the visual as another layer of data.

Disciplines that have engaged more fully with analysing visual material, e.g. media studies, visual sociology, anthropology and cultural studies, have been less inhibited by the enlightenment project than have psychologists. They are more relativist in terms of evidentiary claims and less apologetic and more creative in

their analysis of images. Analytic process is rarely made explicit and assumptions about replication and generalisation are set aside in favour of truth claims based on sound argument and theoretical support. Those engaged in semiological analyses do provide a greater level of detail about analysis, but tend to incorporate substantial theoretical baggage (Rose, 2001) and offer no clear method for conducting analysis (Slater, 1998).

Cross-disciplinary raiding in the 1980s encouraged the social and health psychologists of the 1990s to turn to qualitative methods. This has led to the development and appropriation of a wide range of techniques for analysing text. Many accept that discursive approaches need to make a further stretch to take in the visual but are still very committed to showcasing system and rigour. It is hard to shake off an “upbringing” as a researcher in psychology. We have been steeped in a disciplinary culture which is underpinned by the assumption that all analytic procedures and sampling strategies must be visible and explicit. To us it seems reasonable to ask to see the “working out” in an analysis so that we can evaluate any reading offered, approximate the steps other researchers have taken and align our own approach against those of others. It is perhaps for this reason that it is easier to focus on data elicitation, where the analytic is more fully established than on analysis of the visual.

New analytic approaches may begin in a fuzzy way (e.g. Potter and Wetherell, 1987) but they are soon pinned down into explicit steps that provide an exemplary way through an analysis (cf. Smith, 2003; Willig, 2001). The battles for ownership of terms may frustrate us, the establishment of strict demarcation lines may be restrictive, but to their credit psychologists are trying to find a common methodological and analytical language. In other disciplines, it appears, at least to a psychologist outsider, that there is less impetus to do this. Rose (2001:73) has argued that there is “a tendency for each semiological study to invent its own analytical terms”.

In trying to find a method to enable a direct analysis of visual material, I have explored the methods used in those disciplines that do incorporate the visual, including visual ethnography (Pink, 2007), visual sociology (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; van Leeuwen, 2001), visual cultural studies (Lister and Wells, 2001; Shirato and Webb, 2004) media studies (Bell, Boehringer and Crofts, 1982) and visual anthropology (Ball and Smith, 1992; Collier and Collier, 1986). All have something to offer, particularly in terms of providing an agenda of questions to address, but none offers a system for analysing visual data that works for me. I have nevertheless plunged into a visual analysis because I have research questions that make it necessary.

I have explored a range of ways to understand identity, and in one project where the focus was on the personhood of people with learning disabilities I found myself limited to variations on the interview. To rely largely on interviews where many of your participants have less facility with language is to limit the possibilities of a study. This chapter describes my attempt to find a plausible technique for analysing visual data, in this case photographic portraits of people with learning disabilities that were presented in a calendar format. The calendars intrigued me

because, in a cultural context where people with learning disabilities are almost invisible, here they are presented as a spectacle, specifically to be looked at. Both calendars were produced with the expressed purpose of presenting positive images of people with learning disabilities, but each was produced in very different circumstances and enabled different kinds of engagement and agency in the production of the images. One calendar was co-produced by the people who appeared in it. The other was the work of the photographer. I was interested in exploring the visuality of people with learning disability in terms of the cultural significances, social practices and power relations in which that visuality is enmeshed. I therefore needed an analytic that would allow me to compare sets of images thematically.

I have described this analytic as polytextual thematic analysis. It is polytextual in that it assumes that all texts (including visual texts) are predicated on one another, and each can only be read by reference to others (Curt, 1994). It is “thematic” in that it attempts to identify the repetitive features or themes in the data that enable patterns to come into view. My approach is very like a thematic analysis of the kind described by Hayes (2000), and further developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis that I describe here is inductive, but the basic approach is also amenable to a theory-led thematic analysis (Hayes, 1997). It is an approach that is as epistemologically neutral as thematic analysis, the proof of which is seen in the studies that have used the approach in the last ten years, which I will return to at the close of the chapter.

### **Psychology needs to analyse the visual**

Social scientists have long held that “the visual representations of society are both methods of research, and resources, or topics to be studied in their own right” (Denzin, 2004:237), Psychology struggles with the visual and lacks confidence in visual methods. If psychology does its job well and really captures human experience, its findings will appear as little more than common sense. My argument here has three elements. Firstly, psychologists are embedded within cultures and construct knowledge from cultural resources and address questions that are culturally meaningful. Secondly, the things that they “dis-cover”, once extracted from culture, must be returned to it in order to be recognisable as knowledge. Once provided with insight into a cultural phenomenon by psychology, members of the culture must be able to recognise it from their own experience. It must be plausible to acquire the status of validity. Although the “common-sensicality” of our knowledge troubles psychology from time to time when our status as experts is affronted, it is nevertheless a bedrock assumption that underpins much qualitative research, including those methods that incorporate participant validation. Our methods are essentially the basic human skills of watching carefully what people do and listening carefully to what they say. There is no magic in this. However, in the areas of psychology where the most basic methods apply, we find it hard to assert expertise if we do not claim some special technique to give credibility to our method.

Membership of the cultural group that we study, and knowledge of its language, gives us the sense that texts provide clear access to the thoughts, ideas and experiences of others. We even have code books/dictionaries to help us check our interpretations. Psychologists would be reluctant to look at an image and offer an interpretation unless they have techniques to guide them (Beloff, 1997). We tend to assume that the meaning is embedded in the method (Tseelon, 1991). Other social scientists would have no such qualms because they feel the most important investment is in theory, and that it is the theory that gives weight to their claim to expertise, not analytical technique. Such claims are perfectly fair. Interpretations are based on theory, on a conceptualisation of what a particular behaviour might mean, rather than upon a method.

When we turn to the visual we have no rule books to support our interpretations and must fall back on a wider disparate range of texts and experiences to justify our interpretation of the image. Apparent consensus may occur. At particular times in particular cultural locations the meaning of a visual display is so frequently referred to and so widely discussed that a dominant interpretation may be accessible to the psychologist. However, when we look at an image and call it research, the reading of the data becomes more open to validity challenges, the status of the data becomes tenuous and the author/researcher may feel pressured to engage with devices which add status to their analyses. These devices would include the development of complex systems of codes (the less accessible to the non-initiated the better) to create “expertise” in visual analysis. The author/researcher would almost inevitably have to translate their understanding of the visual data back into language so that the analysis “counts as an analysis”. Visual elements of the data can be used to illustrate, when they have been discursively “worked over”, but they cannot be used to convey or exemplify an interpretation. The interpretation rests in the language, not in the image. I argue that we can resist our fear of being “imposter” scholars.

### **An attempt to analyse photographic portraits**

In 2006, two calendars were created, each of which contained twelve portraits of people with learning disabilities. I was intrigued by the fact that, while people with learning disabilities are largely invisible in British culture, the calendars would define them as something to be looked at – a spectacle.

The calendars were both created by people with a stated interest in providing constructive and positive representations of people with learning disabilities. One was published by the Down’s Syndrome Association and the other by an advocacy organisation – People First.<sup>1</sup> The additional text that supported the two calendars made it clear that the conditions of their production were quite different. The Down’s Syndrome Association calendar was largely the work of Richard Bailey, a photographer and the father of Billie-Jo, a young woman with Down’s syndrome. In the cover notes for the calendar he states that people with Down’s syndrome:



*are* expected to attempt the kinds of things that “we” all take for granted. There is no reason why they shouldn’t get married, there is no reason why they shouldn’t attend mainstream school and go on to further education, there is no reason why they shouldn’t go on to gain some kind of employment and make their own contribution to society. There is no reason why they shouldn’t live happy and meaningful lives surrounded by the people who love them.

The second calendar is entitled “Positive and Proud”. It was created to celebrate the year of disabled people in a joint project between Bridgend People First<sup>2</sup> and Valley and Vale Community Arts.<sup>3</sup> Each portrait is accompanied by a short poem written by the people portrayed. The statement that accompanies this calendar makes similar statements about aspirations for inclusion and fulfilment for people with learning disabilities. However, the message about its production is written in the voice of the people represented rather than on their behalf. It emphasises their own aspirations for their lives and states that the “images and poetry represent the result of each individual’s journey to self awareness and self discovery”.<sup>4</sup>

In light of the agentic differences in their production, I set out to analyse each calendar independently before comparing them. For the purposes of this analysis I was interested more in the content of the representations of learning disability offered rather than with more discursive questions about how these representations are constructed as real, truthful and natural.

### **There are only so many things that you can do with data**

As a social constructionist informed by a critical polytextual approach (Curt, 1994), I was prepared to use any and all means for decoding and providing alternative readings of my data, but needed to settle on a single means for organising the data and finding pattern in it in order to construct a coherent analysis. I approached the analysis by first reading everything that I could find about visual data analysis. The material was limited and often less than explicit. Where it did exist, the approach tended not to be helpful in terms of how it conceived the sampling strategy, or in terms of the level of engagement with the data. The two most useful texts I read were those of Sarah Pink (2007) and Gillian Rose (2001). Pink doesn’t offer techniques for conducting visual ethnography but does offer a very clear theory for a method. Rose provides a crystal-clear account of a number of key approaches to visual methodology. Her clarity enabled my critique of the literature but gave no technique to guide the analysis.

I was offered many useful questions that could inform my analysis, but no one offered me any ideas about how to handle the data, how to order and organise it, how to find the pattern. I did however notice a pattern in the writing about visual analysis, and it was a familiar one. I had the same kind of feeling I sometimes have when teaching different approaches to analysing interview data. This is the feeling that there are only so many things you can do with data. Researchers explain and label what they do in different ways, depending on how they understand the

processes of knowledge production through research. The same actions had different claims attached to them, but the actions taken to organise data and find pattern in it look pretty much the same, regardless of epistemology.

The interpretations we make are not contained within specific images, or interviews. Both interview transcript and photograph are polysemic and polytextual. We cannot interpret a text or image through that text or image alone, we draw on the meanings carried by other texts and images. As Derrida (1978:25) so usefully pointed out, words only have “meaning in relation to other words. Meanings are always in flux, relationships are arbitrary and ultimate meanings always deferred”.

For my study I needed an analytic approach that would allow for this intertextuality, but also allow me to deal with intervisuality. I consider the term “intervisuality” as having a usefulness equivalent to intertextuality. Just as written texts cannot be interpreted without the use of other texts, not least a dictionary, images cannot simply be perceived. Every image is related to every other image available in culture and can only be interpreted by reference to those other images. In trying to draw out themes from the calendar photographs I would have to rely on a visual language that is developed from looking at other images, basically all culturally available visual resources. I was less interested in drawing out any structural properties or rules underlying the construction of the images than I was in recording, describing and organising the features of the images in a way that allowed me to focus on the content. I realised that there would be a number of useful reference points from which to explore the contingent and located intertextuality and intervisuality in these calendars. I needed an approach that would allow me to use anything and everything to make sense of my data.

### **Getting a broad understanding of patterns in data**

One very useful technique for getting an overview of data and developing research ideas and research questions is inductive thematic analysis. This approach puts the emphasis on finding common themes. It allows comparison between sets of data and it is descriptive before it becomes interpretative. This seemed an appropriate approach for comparing two sets of images of people with learning disabilities that were constructed with avowedly similar “intentions” but within very different contexts of production. I needed a visual analytic that would allow an overview of quite a number of images. Thematic analysis was ideal as it provided a quick and easy method to give a view of the pattern in a sample of visual images. It is potentially rigorous, and makes the interpretative actions of the analysis as visible and as explicit as possible.

### **Illustrating polytextual thematic analysis: the analytic process**

I have therefore settled upon an approach that I have termed polytextual thematic analysis. This refers to the analysis of visual data that looks across sets of images and tries to capture the recurring patterns in the analysis both in terms of form and

content. The themes are recognised as the result of drawing on a range of other culturally available visual images and texts, and are interpreted in relation to these images and texts. This does not involve translation of visual symbols into written text, rather description of the elements of the visual texts that are recognisable and available in the visual and written knowledge of a culture.

The themes are written descriptions of visual elements, but could, and hopefully will, be illustrated visually in images that capture and represent the theme. Not that I have yet found an effective means for doing this. Given that the theme captures elements of many different images, the ideal would be to create a new visual image that expresses the theme. I am limited in doing this for two reasons. Firstly, I would need to collaborate with someone whose artistic skills are far better than mine. But more importantly, the theme may not refer to something that can be captured as a complete image; it may refer to an often-repeated part of an image. So while I might find a quote from an interview that expresses a textual theme well, to “snip” elements out of images to create a composite, or even to find one part of an image that expresses the theme, would not necessarily provide a readable image.

### **The analysis**

The analysis involves viewing the pictures repeatedly while reading and considering the various cultural images and texts that enable their interpretation. In the process we are looking for key themes, and key words that will capture recurring visual images.

### ***Sampling strategy***

The sample will always be determined by the research question. I have collected many different images of people with learning disability over the years as I have an interest in both visual identity and learning disability. The two sets that I focused on for the study were interesting in that they were both presented in the form of calendars, although one set was also presented in an art exhibition. As I have already said, there was something intriguing to me about the use of portraits of people with learning disability in calendars, as calendar portraits are explicitly defined as to be looked at.

In polytextual thematic analysis sampling is, in keeping with other constructionist qualitative approaches, purposive and theory-led. Criteria for inclusion should be stated clearly, but there is no need to address issues of representativeness. It is possible to use relatively large samples of images, and possible to compare different sets of data. I will set out the basic steps involved before illustrating the approach with an extract of the results from my analysis of the calendars.

### ***The “analytic”***

1. Look at the images over and over again, singly, in groups, serially and in as many different orders as possible. Note any potential themes that emerge,

taking care to describe the features of the image that evoke that theme. These initial things might be called proto-themes to signal the tentative and fluid nature of the themes as they are beginning to take shape.

2. As with any qualitative approach it is important to make notes in the reflective log to capture reflections on experiences that connect with the image, ideas about why you might notice what you are noticing. Beginning with description about your assumptions about the data, what you are expecting to see, what you hope to discover, what you think may be absent, can all help to make the processing of the images a reflexive and self-conscious process.
3. Feel the effect that the images have on you and describe these as fully as you can in your notes. Go back to these notes and add additional comments as you continue to analyse other images to see if you are experiencing the pictures in different ways as you start to “get your eye in”.
4. Where a proto-theme appears to occur more than once, collect together all the material relevant to that theme. Pull the relevant pictures together and look once again to see whether the proto-theme is distinct.
5. Write a brief description (or definition) of the proto-theme.
6. Once a proto-theme has been identified in a picture you will need to go back over all of the other images to see if it is recognisable anywhere else.
7. Once again pull together all the material relevant to that proto-theme. Revise the description of the proto-theme if necessary. Bring together description of the elements from different images that best illustrate that theme. It is at this point that the proto-themes (i.e. first attempts at themes, or primitive themes) may be elevated to the status of theme. However, such a shift signals that the theme has been checked and considered many times. It does not mean that it is fixed in its final form.
8. Continue to work on identifying themes in the pictures until no further distinctive themes (that are relevant to the question(s) that you have brought to the analysis) emerge.
9. Look at the descriptions of all themes in relation to each other, and consider the extent to which they are distinct. If there is any lack of clarity, redefine the themes that you have changed. Write descriptions of themes that highlight the differences between themes. The object is to maximise differentiation in order to pull out distinctive features of the image.
10. Look at the themes to see if any cluster together in a way that suggests a higher-order theme that connects them.
11. Define the higher-order theme, and consider all themes in relation to it. As other higher-order themes emerge consider each in relation to all other themes that have emerged.
12. It is at this stage that it is necessary to make a judgement about which of the themes that have emerged best address the research question so that a limited number may be selected for writing up. It will be helpful to incorporate any supporting materials that contextualise the images being analysed.

## **Presenting results**

If themes are to be presented in the conventional way as written descriptions of the visual elements of the data, then each should be presented with a descriptive title, a definition and descriptions of the elements that make up that theme.

Because images are devoid of verbal language, although arguably always discursively produced (Foucault, 1972), the textual relocation of an image is easier and renders an image open to interpretation by an enormous range of people from different cultural locations. However, given the relatively inexpensive access to sophisticated technology for producing and reproducing images, it is not beyond the researcher's power to create composite images to illustrate themes. We could group and cluster images to juxtapose and show the relationships between particular features, perhaps in the form of a visual essay (Berger, 1972). I have not attempted this here.

### **An illustration – learning disability in spectacular form**

The analysis of the calendars resulted in a wealth of themes, sub-themes and, for want of a better term, super-ordinate themes. In the People First calendar there were 12 clusters of themes and two single themes that stood alone. In the Down's Syndrome Association calendar there were eight clusters of themes. The theme map for the People First calendar was more complex and contained greater diversity than the Down's Syndrome Association calendar. Rather than try to present all the data here, I will illustrate a small number of themes in brief, but locate them in their cluster to show how this analytic technique has achieved its purpose of describing the features of the two calendars thematically to show some important differences and similarities between them. I have focused on differences here because they are easier to present briefly without full discussion of nuance.

One interesting difference between the calendars is the way in which gender is represented. In the Down's Syndrome Association calendar, no person is portrayed in a way that confronts gender norms, and the only gender-relevant theme to emerge was the theme of "Gender-neutral".

#### ***Gender-neutral***

Although all people presented in the calendar are dressed in gender-normative ways, clothing is typically ambiguous, often a uniform. Where an infant is shown naked in multiple poses, only the top half of the body is shown, making gender ambiguous. In most portraits the activities shown are gender-neutral. None of the activities refers specifically to gender-related activities or positions.

In the People First calendar there was more emphasis on gender and a cluster of themes emerged – "Powerful women", "Hyper-femininity" and "Hyper-masculinity". The themes of hyper-masculinity and hyper-femininity provide an informative contrast to the underplaying of gender in the Down's Syndrome Association calendar.

### ***Hyper-masculinity***

This theme refers to the way in which men in the portraits are presented in assertive, even aggressive postures, engaged in male stereotypical activities and associated with male-defined artefacts. Be-suited Hywell leans against a sports car, Tom sits astride a motorbike in a leather jacket. Rhodri stands in outdoor gear, clutching binoculars, wearing a serious expression. His poem states: “I am an eagle, handsome, strong and free”.

### ***Hyper-femininity***

This theme is best illustrated in the portraits of Julie and Patricia. Julie is presented in a setting of high drama and glamour on a stage lit from below, surrounded by lush red curtains. Her full-length dress swishes through the edges of a rich silk cape as she smiles up into the camera with the sexual confidence of a model or actress. Patricia wears the iconic ultra-feminine bridal outfit. She sits with lacy gloved hands neatly folded on her frilled, be-ribboned and layered satin dress, surrounded by her veil. While the theme captures the aspiration for a hyper-feminine identity, Patricia’s accompanying poem asserts that this is a status denied her in her daily life. “Look and see what can never be, my dream to have a family. Why can’t I be a bride? Why has this been denied?”

Another contrast can be seen between clusters of themes about relating. In the Down’s Syndrome Association calendar there is a theme entitled “In love”.

### ***In love***

This theme appears in only one portrait, but is explicitly identified by a caption “love” (Figure 31.1). It conveys a romantic image of couple-ness with no reference to sexuality. A young couple lean into each other’s arms in an idyllic country setting. The man sits beside and slightly behind the woman, his arm around her shoulder, reaching down to her hand on one side. The other arm reaches forward to her other hand. Their faces touch side on, their hands are clasped. There is no other intimacy between them.

In contrast, within the People First calendar there was a cluster of four themes about relating to others but also a cluster of six themes about sexuality. The theme of “Sexual assertiveness” is an example of these.

### ***Sexual assertiveness***

This theme is about expressing sexual intention explicitly. David lies on his side in a “male-stud” pose, legs outstretched and crossed, leaning forward on to his arms, chin tipped downward so that he looks upward to the photographer (Figure 31.2). He is wearing jeans, a tight tee shirt and a medallion. The attached poem states that he is sexy and ambitious and that “girls think I’m delicious”. Another young man in a suit poses against a red sports car above a poem that describes him as “handsome,



Figure 31.1 The theme “In love”. © Richard Bailey.

smart and cute”. An older man in leather jacket sits astride a motorbike with a younger woman leaning back into his arms. His poem describes him as “sexy and bold”. These are assertive exuberant images of sexually confident people.

The final pair of themes to be contrasted relate to the contexts in which the people with learning disability are portrayed. There is more emphasis on individuals and identity in the People First calendar, sometimes very little of the location is visible in the portrait or the location is neutral – perhaps with a single-colour background. There is more emphasis on context in the Down’s Syndrome Association calendar, and people are often presented in very beautiful settings. Indeed, one of the themes, “Idealised setting”, refers to idyllic settings where there is nature in full flush, the sun shines and there is no clutter or litter to be seen. In fact the whole cluster of themes about setting was titled “Mainstream settings”, because all of the contexts were apparently mainstream ones. The school settings in two of the portraits were mainstream schools. Other settings were valued locations such as theatre stages, sports tracks and workplace settings. The theme of

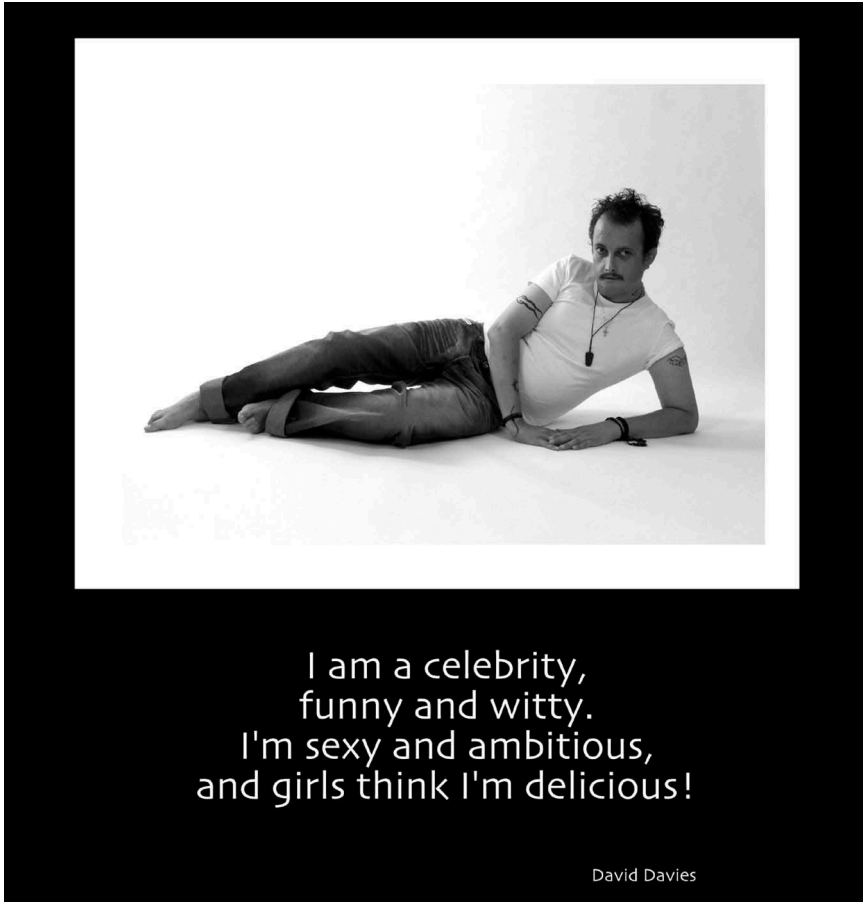


Figure 31.2 The theme “Sexual assertiveness”. © Alison McGann.

“Workplace” is a very interesting example of a mainstream setting as it has a twist that casts doubt on the notion of inclusivity that is implied by the notion of mainstream.

### ***Workplace***

This theme explicitly conveys a recognisable workplace with work-related items and equipment clearly on view. It is drawn from two of the portraits that are taken in workplace settings. The workers are in uniform, one a chef in a kitchen, the other shows two waiting staff taking a break (Figure 31.3). The settings are apparently mainstream, and therefore show people with learning disabilities actively





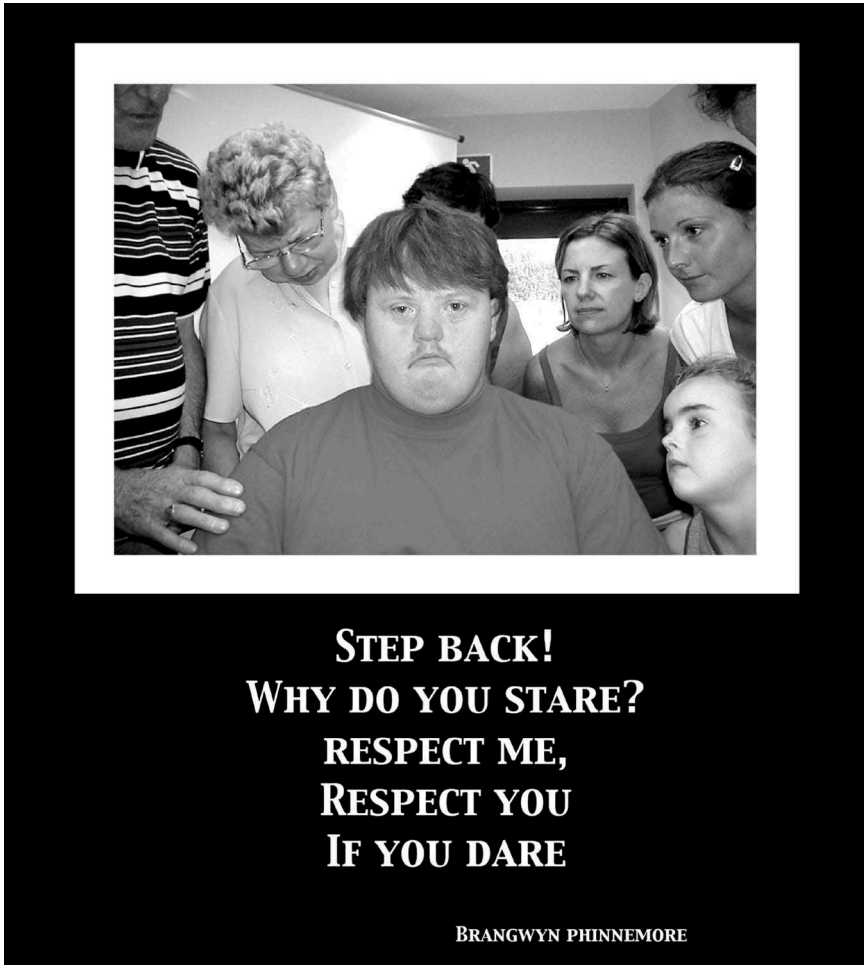
Figure 31.3 The theme “Workplace”. © Richard Bailey.

engaged in valuable and productive work. However, in the picture showing the waiting staff on a break, there are two young women with Down's syndrome. It would be unusual to find two employees with a learning disability coincidentally employed in a small work setting. This may suggest that this is a supported work placement of some kind.

These themes confirm that achieving inclusion in mainstream settings is something that the Down's Syndrome Association calendar wants to convey. By contrast, there is a cluster of themes around power in the People First calendar that suggest that being permitted to enter mainstream settings is not as highly prized as being able to assert your own power. This is illustrated in an interesting way in the theme of “Aggression”. There is nothing remotely approaching the notion of aggression in the Down's Syndrome Association calendar, where the photographer overtly sets up the portraits and directs their content.

***Aggression***

This theme captures aggressive postures, statements and gestures. In a vibrant red sweater, Brangwyn stares out of his portrait aggressively – his poem conveys an explicit challenge “Step back! Why do you stare? Respect me, Respect you if you dare” (Figure 31.4). This is the only overtly aggressive and challenging image in either of the calendars, but it is clear and explicit in its assertive aggression.



*Figure 31.4* The theme “Aggression”. © Alison McGann.

## **Interpretation**

There is not enough space to engage in a commentary on these themes or to relate them to the literature and to the debates with which they might engage. This chapter merely sets out to show the possibilities in such an analysis and to show that this analytic is effective in that it enables the powerful description of themes that illustrate important features in visual data. However, I would like to briefly share with the reader some of my reasons for believing that polytextual thematic analysis of visual data enabled me to address my original research objectives in a productive way.

Even this brief description has shown that the analytic allowed me to identify identity-relevant themes. Having a systematic way of comparing the theme structures of the two calendars allowed me to make claims about the ways in which different groups attempt to assert positive visual identities for people with learning disabilities. The differences between the calendars showed that themes of “inclusion” and “mainstream” that are crucial elements of the government’s Valuing People agenda are treated differently by those who wish to promote valued visual identities for others than by those who wish to lead their own identity projects. The themes from the People First calendar appeared to me to connect with an agentic foray into mainstream settings and engagement with mainstream identities that include a fuller range of grittier visualities, including aggression, sexual intention and the individual’s control over identity production. This finding alone shows that the cultural production of identities for people with learning disabilities in calendars can neutralise difference and normalise disability in ways that make people with learning disability more acceptable to mainstream society. It has also enabled me to discover that the calendar can be a device that enables the identity projects and intentions of people with learning disabilities and allows them to assert visual identities that they value regardless of public opinion and government agendas.

In the first steps of analysis an attempt was made to stay at the surface level, to take the visual representations at face value and to describe them. However, there is, of course, another level of meaning below the surface that we can begin to see when we look across collections of images. These different levels of interpretation are often referred to in terms of creating higher-order themes that are more abstract and capture something beyond an individual datum. A higher order of interpretation is possible with this data, in that themes about “Agency” and “Identity project” allow us to consider the political implications of the two calendars. Unfortunately there isn’t space to explore these here. It is my ambition to try to capture these themes visually so that people with learning disability might be able to engage with them and thereby help me further develop an understanding of what it means for someone with a learning disability to be portrayed in a calendar. I would also hope that by presenting the analysis in visual form there is a potential for handing over responsibility for interpretation to an “audience” in the same way that ethnographers such as Trinh (1992) have tried to do with documentary film.

## **Last word**

Shared meanings are related to groups and are contingent on historic and cultural location. Our interpretation is always produced from within that location. We are users and experts of our historical and cultural location. The images, the words and our interpretations are not universal and value-free. Neither need this be true for the visual images that we interpret. The fact that they are viewed and interpreted while wearing our “cultural goggles” doesn’t mean they are less useful within other “worlds of meaning”. If we can shrug off that old search for enlightenment, we can see that the fact that we use a specific lens to view the images is precisely the thing that makes our interpretation culturally useful. The lens acts as a means of interpretation – a language, just as the dictionary and other texts provide us with the language to analyse and interpret written text.

I will not feel that this approach to analysing visual data is complete until I have the means of presenting the analysis in visual form. But that means not only further developing my own creative skills, but also requires a shift in the culture of journals to enable visual data to be presented in a wider range of formats.

In trying to revise and improve this chapter I have explored the ways in which others have put polytextual thematic analysis to use. I am excited to find that it has been used in a range of different ways, by people working in a range of disciplines and who aver different epistemological positions.

This is enormously encouraging to me. At the very beginning of my career in psychology I witnessed the “turn to language” and the abduction of discourse analysis from literary theory to provide a growth of new thinking around qualitative methods. At this point I was trying to find a methodology that would enable me to explore both social representations and discourse. I saw the potential of the Social Representations movement but was quickly frustrated by the methodolatry that surrounded Moscovici and the theoretical restrictions and methodological prescriptions that precluded a radically relativist position that assumed that there were many different ways in which knowledge can be produced. While working on my PhD I found Potter and Wetherell’s introduction to a social psychological take on discourse analysis and naively assumed that this could be developed in any number of ways, including to allow me to analyse both discourse and representations as different kinds of knowledge. In the years that followed, I saw a rapid development of the discourse landscape into camps that asserted quite rigid positions both theoretically and methodologically. And still I realised that there were only so many things that you could do with data, regardless of epistemological position, regardless of the terms you used and the rituals you set up to enshrine your methodology. I am pleased to see that people who are quite happy to espouse specific epistemological positions, specific political positions and who aspire to work with particular theoretical frameworks see the potential in an epistemology-free methodology.

My search for others using this approach led me to someone using feminist theory combining polytextual thematic analysis with inductive thematic analysis to study visual representations of sexual violence in online news outlets (Schwark,

2017). I discovered Monk and Phillipson (2015) working in education who used polytextual thematic analysis to analyse the metaphors of childhood educators, and learned once again the potential of metaphor analysis. Marketing researchers Presi, Maehle and Kleppe (2016) used polytextual thematic analysis in combination with three other visual analytics to examine the use of brand selfies in social media to explore how this practice shapes brand image. I found Farren Gibson, Lee and Crabb (2015) combining polytextual thematic analysis with a multimodal critical discourse analysis to explore constructions of breast cancer and Moran and Lee (2013) using the same approach to examine the selling of genital cosmetic surgery to healthy women on surgical websites. Ironically, I also found Sarrica and Brondi (2018) using polytextual thematic analysis in a participatory project on sustainable energy to add another layer of analysis to a Social Representations study using photovoice. Perhaps others have found it as frustrating as I have to be restricted by those who wish to pin down an analytic process (as perhaps I did ten years ago) like a butterfly in a display case. This is my reason for changing the title of this chapter, even though the analysis it describes is the same as in the original. I now see that pinning something down to be as transparent as possible about the production of knowledge should perhaps be regarded as a historical description of what was done in an analysis rather than a recipe for what ought to be done.

One of the many things that I admire about the work of Jonathan Smith (2003) in developing interpretative phenomenological analysis is his lack of need to own, define and constrain the methodological approach. He has been as precise as possible in describing it, at each step along the way in its development, but has always encouraged others to extend, adapt and develop it. I think this is one key reason why interpretative phenomenological analysis has been such a productive qualitative method. I could have argued for polytextual thematic analysis to be a social constructionist approach – that is clearly in keeping with the assumption of polytextuality. I could have dubbed it a feminist approach or a critical approach as I would espouse these in my own work. However, I believe an agile methodology should be ruthlessly exploited, remade, recombined and completely dis-respected on all counts, provided that it is guided by an intention of transparency – an attempt to account for the construction of knowledge.

As I said in the original chapter, there is nothing magical in this approach, it is common sense, and involves attempting to draw upon cultural knowledge and shared perception. I have used anything and everything that I can recognise within the portraits in the two calendars I analysed, and I have tried to do it as explicitly and reflexively as possible. It is both simple and complex and a useful approach for analysing visual data. I am really pleased to see that others are using it as a reference point and making it their own as an analytic.

## **Notes**

- 1 The initial analysis of this data was presented at the Appearance Matters Conference in Bath 2007. A full account of the analysis and a more detailed description of the conditions of construction of these calendars will be made available in a paper under submission.

- 2 People First is a charity which enables advocacy and leisure activity for people with learning disabilities.
- 3 The photographer for the project was Alison McGann.
- 4 This quote is taken from the frontispiece of the calendar.

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# ‘SO YOU THINK WE’VE MOVED, CHANGED, THE REPRESENTATION GOT MORE WHAT?’

Methodological and analytical reflections  
on visual (photo-elicitation) methods  
used in the men-as-fathers study

*Karen Henwood, Fiona Shirani and Mark Finn*

## **Note on the second edition**

Since writing this chapter for publication in 2011 we (Karen Henwood and Fiona Shirani) have expanded our repertoire of visual methods in new projects, moving from the field of fatherhood to domestic energy use. In this second iteration of this chapter we largely retain the original narrative as a detailed account of our men-as-fathers visual work, with updated links to our more recent visual developments as part of our work on the Energy Biographies and FLEXIS projects, as well as updates to relevant literature.

## **Why research the visual?**

Within the social sciences generally (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001), and qualitative psychology specifically (Frith *et al.*, 2005; Reavey and Johnson, 2008), realisation is growing of the value of working with data in different media (audio, visual and textual), for giving researchers access to different modalities of meaning. Since the 1990s (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992; Henwood and Nicolson, 1995), speaking and writing have been key modalities for qualitative psychologists inquiring into the experiential, relational, embodied, socially situated, discursively constituted and culturally meaningful ways in which people encounter others, live out their daily lives and engage with their everyday worlds



(see e.g. Camic *et al.*, 2003; Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2008). There is now a strong case for further expanding such research by recording and analysing *visual data* (e.g. photographs, paintings, films) where experiencing, representing and communicating meaning are accomplished in *visual mode*. Recording and analysing what is seen and how it is viewed, along with the ways of telling inspired by such viewings and sightings, give access to different types of information not available by other means, enriching ways of representing experience and enhancing understanding of studied life (Reavey and Johnson, 2008). Visual research methods form an important element of experientially aligned, multimodal approaches, with photo-elicitation particularly well established and remaining an enduringly popular approach (Henwood *et al.*, 2017).

General commentaries written about developing trends in social research methods attribute rising enthusiasm for visual research to such things as: visualisation becoming an integral part of everyday life and contemporary culture; easy availability of digital information technologies for making, collecting and showing static and moving visual images; and expanding skills and competences in using visual media, stimulating use of visual images within the research process (see e.g. Knoblauch *et al.*, 2008). Equally important is the coincidence of visual and technological literacy with the promotion of a more reflexive, perspectival understanding of the principles and practices of knowledge generation (Harrison, 2002). Multiple perspectives, or socially and culturally located viewpoints, are included as part of researchers' efforts at knowledge making, and reflexive researchers are charged with bringing them together to produce a (more or less) theorised account of the qualities and textures of subjectivity and experience (Henwood *et al.*, 1998; Henwood, 2008). Increasingly, such perspectives are considered multilocal and centred on movement, involving wide-ranging sensorial engagements with the world. Being multimodal, these engagements include, but are not restricted to, sequential acts of listening and looking (Pink, 2008).

Visual methods have been described as the 'oldest new methods in qualitative research' (Travers, 2011: 5) but, whilst photographs have been a central aspect of some sociologists' work for decades, visual research methods have experienced a sudden surge in popularity (Rose, 2014). Writing in favour of a particular kind of shift in perspective in visual research, Bohnsack (2008) proposes that visual researchers inquire into how people read visual images and what they do with the images, and do not simply use images to document studied life. Parallel developments in ethnographic study criticise the practice of reporting at a distance, and provide alternative ethnographic practices for studying visual culture as involving constructing points of view. Here, researcher and researched are brought into the cultural world, and questions asked about the authority, intelligibility and cultural significance of their readings. Creation of knowledge out of what each viewer brings to photographic acts of viewing – portraying others and analysing patterns of representation – is a way of getting at what is more ambiguous, polysemic and difficult to interpret in visual images. It shifts interest to the audience's ways of viewing, and away from the producer's world of meaning. What people notice in an image, and make meaning out of, is part of the creative,

knowledge-creating process involving the analysis of signification, usefully pointing to another key issue in visual study – the way it can involve shifts in mode of social interaction. For example, when looking at an image, people can experience a shared engagement with it, and a common knowledge of what is visible in the interview. Studying modes of communication and interaction (Jenkins *et al.*, 2008) reinforces the point that verbalising experience, and presenting oneself through the image, are not one and the same; the way we live and our feelings are not always readily available to verbal description (Reavey and Johnson, 2008).

Photo-elicitation is a multimodal technique for studying what people (come to) see in, and say about, pictures. It provides ways of combining the visual and verbal by using pre-existing, researcher- or participant-generated images, encouraging their careful and creative viewing by study participants, and eliciting extensive, verbalised responses to their symbolic qualities. As with open-ended interviews (Harper, 1994), researchers find ways to prompt, stimulate and give guidance to interviewees – listening and encouraging engagement with, commentary upon and dialogue about the visual materials. Photographs are held to be uniquely informative about time and place because their particular properties (such as facial expressions, gestures, mannerisms, clothes of those photographed, photographic genres and semiotic features) evoke an era, and link people to historical epochs of which they have no personal experience (Harper, 2002). Seeing themselves in, or experiencing (dis)identification with others in, the image can help people talk about their own personal lives, and engage with larger social realities (Harrison, 2002). Photo-elicitation techniques enable people to speak of thoughts, aspirations, hopes and fears in ways that are not strictly referential – speaking not of things that have actually happened, but that operate as part of the imaginary. As well as being singular and static, images can be viewed multiply – e.g. as part of narrative structures, and sequential analysis can promote accounting for continuity and change in time and place by respondents and/or researchers (Harper, 2005).

Traditional approaches to photo-elicitation – where the image is used as a prompt for talk – have come under some criticism for treating the visual qualities of the image as incidental (Allan and Tinkler, 2015). Taking a ‘traditionalist’ approach then, showing an image is not in itself sociology, it only becomes so with a lot of explanatory text (Travers, 2011). However, we argue that the use of images in this way can go beyond a straightforward description of what is pictured to help participants articulate things which can otherwise be difficult to talk about (Shirani *et al.*, 2015) or remain invisible (Jewitt, 2012). Similarly, Rose (2014) highlights the ability of visual methods to generate evidence that other approaches cannot, alongside exploring the taken-for-granted, and being inherently collaborative (or shifting the power imbalance between researcher and participant – Liebenberg, 2009), as strengths of a visual approach.

### **Working with visual methods in the men-as-fathers study**

We address our own ways of working with a range of visual methods (specifically photo-elicitation methods) in a social psychological study of the dynamics of men’s

identities, relationships and subjectivities as, and after, they become fathers for the first time (see Henwood *et al.*, 2008a; Finn and Henwood, 2009).<sup>1</sup> The study explored what it means to be a man and father in contemporary Britain, asking such questions as: How, and to what extent, are men's identities being refashioned within transforming gender relations, family relationships and wider socio-cultural change? Are changing expectations for fatherhood producing new forms of masculinity?

Conceptually and methodologically, we are concerned to bring into focus how it is that men *come to be* men and fathers – how their identities and subjectivities become configured. We view the processes of masculine identity formation, and paternal subjectivity, as steeped in the men's everyday assumptions, experiences and perceptions about how things are, could and should be (now and in the future). Accordingly, we attend to the ways in which interviewees construct their points of view, drawing upon their own biographically/relationally conditioned psychological investments; finding different ways of negotiating with normative frameworks, expectations and beliefs; and invoking or activating culturally and socially situated discourses to account for, and interpret, the meanings that make up the fabric of daily life.

Like others (Wetherell and Edley, 1999; Frosh *et al.*, 2002), our way of studying identity and subjectivity foregrounds their emergence, production or constitution within ordinary acts of meaning making.<sup>2</sup> In view of critical methodological commentaries (outlined above), we have posed the additional questions: Does ordinary meaning making occur through medium of talk or discourse alone? Might it be necessary to augment purely talk-based (discursive) methods of inquiry by asking questions about sense making and the representation of experience, via other sensory modalities such as the visual (Henwood *et al.*, 2008a)?

Our study is qualitative longitudinal (QLL) in design, making it possible to investigate in biographical terms how identities and relationships change in and through time. One of the prime developers and advocates of QLL methodology, Saldaña (2003: 25) strongly advocates including visual methods, as 'visual images, whether still or in motion, provide some of the richest and most tangible data for accessing change through time'. Accordingly, we follow Saldaña's insight and consider how visual methods can help with using time as a vehicle of analysis, contributing to the development of a suite of micro-temporal methods for investigating the invisible temporal (Adam, 2008), complex temporalities (Henwood *et al.*, 2008b) and everyday, temporal and textual processes of change-in-the-making (Neale and Flowerdew, 2003; Neale *et al.*, 2007). A benefit of QLL research is that the expanded time spent with participants provides greater scope for the inclusion of a range of activities (Shirani *et al.*, 2015).

So how, then, can visual methods be used to elicit data and gain insights, potentially making accessible what would otherwise remain inaccessible using talk-based methods alone? We present, comment on and compare three visual research methods (collage, visual sequence, personal photographs)<sup>3</sup> employed in our men-as-fathers study involving two cohorts of variously skilled and socially positioned men from East Anglia ( $n = 30$ ) and South Wales ( $n = 15$ ). The East

Anglia sample was interviewed intensively (three times) in 2000–1: subsequently 18 of the men were re-interviewed 8 years later in summer 2008. Interviews with the South Wales sample occurred in 2008–9, and followed the same pattern of three intensive interviews, one before and two in the first year after the child's birth.

## **Collage**

The collage is a set of 18 photographs, presented simultaneously to participants on an A4 sheet: interviewees were asked to say what they thought about any images that stood out to them, and about the collage as a whole. Photographs depicted fathers in a variety of poses and activities in different settings, alone with children or with other people (wife/partner, other generations) and in a diversity of social circumstances (fathers were younger, older, apparently living in affluent or more impoverished surroundings, etc.), covering a range of contrasting cultural ideas and ideals of fathers. The collage was used in 2000 when participants were first recruited to the study in East Anglia; we took the opportunity to ask about the same collage again with these men when they were revisited again 8 years later.

Practically speaking, presenting the collage fairly early on in interviews with the men (at first interview, during the partner's pregnancy) was a way of stimulating interviewees to initially engage in thinking about fatherhood. This was followed by more in-depth, conversational interviewing about the men's experiences as expectant fathers, their perceptions of the pregnancy, and anticipated change in their lives and relationships with others. We envisaged that the collage would elicit nuanced data on how masculine and paternal identities signified for the interviewees personally and culturally, prompted by the images that had been selected to show diversity in fathering activities and identities, along with historical and contemporary fatherhood representations. The collage was a way of assisting the men to contextualise their own biographical experiences (i.e. connect their own personal experiences and anticipated feelings with wider social realities), as they were being presented with others' lived social realities and different cultural possibilities. Following Harper (1994), we believed that the simultaneous presentation of a group of images on a page might have generative potential, for us as researchers, as specific images would gain more importance through being part of more elaborate visual statements.

Participants, overwhelmingly, selected two images that depicted father, partner and child in a happy and playful scenario, and said that the majority of the photographs were positive, with only two of the 18 images receiving no positive feedback from any of the participants. Perceiving positive father images was important as, without them, interviewees would have been less able to envisage their situations as expectant fathers, especially their imagined futures. However, the general perception of images in the collage as 'pretty positive' meant a lack of differentiation and limited discussion; some participants were unsure of what was expected of them, and how they should critically appraise the photographs; and,

while all could indicate their favoured pictures, responses were generally quite limited as to the reasons behind this:

*Malcolm:* Here, number nine, that's really quite a nice picture certainly. Fourteen's quite nice, number one's nice, two's nice, he's playing with a child.

Three, five's quite important because he's making him watch football!

Although, disappointingly, the men's responses were not extensive, the collage generated useful data. Through this technique it became apparent that images of modes of fathering which did not fit with the men's ideals and expectations were viewed as depicting bad fathers. For example, the men frequently distanced themselves from the image of Michael Jackson, describing him as 'the ultimate freak father' whose behaviour they had no desire to emulate. Whilst receiving a less critical reaction than the Michael Jackson picture, the image of a Victorian father and baby was also problematised for representing an outmoded form of fathering where the father was a distant breadwinner removed from a fun relationship with the child.

The collage proved a useful way of priming discussion of the type of fathering behaviour men wanted to emulate, along with the difficulties they anticipated in doing this. Aside from the positive family images mentioned above, many men selected the picture of a man shaving whilst his small son looks on as a favourite because it represented teaching the child – an important father role. When it came to selecting images they thought would represent their own experiences of fatherhood, several of the men chose pictures they had earlier described in a fairly negative way. One of these images showed a smartly dressed father on a telephone whilst children were present but apparently receiving little of his attention, which participants saw as negative for suggesting the father had no time to spend with his children. Whilst wanting to emulate the playful family images they selected as being positive, these working-father images raised concerns about how the men would reconcile work and family life.

Use of the collage enabled men to select the images they were most attracted to and subsequently highlighted several important issues: concerns about the integration of work and home life, the importance of being seen as a caring and involved father and a rejection of some non-normative types of fathering. However, many of these issues arose during the remainder of the interview and, by allowing the men to select images rather than talk about each one in turn, many of the pictures were overlooked, although it was not clear why. Was it because the men did not relate to them or because they were too normative to warrant comment? Did presenting such a large number of images perceived as 'generally positive' early on in the interview set up expectations around what good fathering involves, thus limiting the rest of the interview dialogue?

To develop our understanding of how the collage had worked as a method, and why it had been only partly successful, we presented it once again to the original East Anglia participants when revisiting them 8 years later, at the end of that interview. Participants were not asked to select their favourite pictures, but what they thought of being shown the pictures as an expectant father then (if they could remember) and now. Many of the fathers had a strong recollection of the task,

even remembering which images were chosen, although their reactions to being asked to do this were fairly mixed. Some of the men had enjoyed the task and repeated it again, picking out which ones they liked best and re-evaluating their original interpretations.

*Simon:* I can sort of remember, I remember a smiling dad with a pile of kids in a sitting room ... Hmmmm. I found that quite useful, I mean if I remember the question was, yes, which ones do you relate to, how do you, what did I do? I think in my mind I interpreted it as which would you aspire to ... which ones do you hope to be ... Yeah I just absolutely fixed on that one ... Yes and remember thinking 'yes, that's good' ... I still, that's a good one. You know ... because ... I'm now informed that this is exactly what kids like more than anything; having a good old rumble about against dad, so I reckon I picked the right one at the time (laughs).

Like Simon, many of the men felt the pictures gained a new salience in light of becoming a father and having 8 years' experience of parenthood. This meant that second time around the men were more likely to comment on pictures that related to their own experiences, rather than picking up on aspirations or fears.

Unsurprisingly, the men were not really able to comment on the methodology, and were more likely to lapse back into the original task. However, none of the respondents had a particularly strong reaction against the collage, and their reflections illustrate the utility of presenting the images before the men became fathers in order to elicit responses about their concerns and aspirations. In hindsight, deploying further methodological strategies, and encouraging participants' more creative, and holistic, engagement with the collage (e.g. by stimulating discussion of cross-referencing of images, sifting and sorting them into cultural categories and agreeing on their meaning) might have produced more elaborated responses.

### **The temporal sequence (visual narrative)**

The visual sequence is an assemblage of images presenting a temporal framing in visual mode of changing socio-cultural representations of fatherhood from Victorian to present day. It was used as an alternative photo-elicitation device, addressing more directly interviewees' perceptions of continuity and change, and questions about complex temporalities, with the second cohort of participants, from South Wales, who joined the study in 2008.

Concerns and drawbacks relating to the collage outlined above led to the photo-elicitation technique being significantly altered 8 years later when another phase of the study was to be carried out with a new sample. We increased our use of historical photographs as, when using the collage, we had realised that an image of the Victorian father (Figure 32.1) provided an illustration of past ways of doing and displaying fatherhood and masculinity that may not be accessible through talk alone, better foregrounding issues of change and temporality. Harper (2002: 23) notes the evocative potentials of photographs in relation to (historical) time:



Figure 32.1 Victorian father as used in collage and sequence techniques.

'Photographs appear to capture the impossible: a person gone; an event past. That extraordinary sense of seeming to retrieve something that has disappeared belongs alone to the photograph and it leads to deep and interesting talk'. Five images were used as a sequential narrative to represent fathering over different generations: (1) Victorian father; (2) 1950's worker/housewife family; (3) 1980's father playing with child; (4) 1990's Athena 'man and baby' image; (5) 2007 image of father and baby face to face in mutual gaze.<sup>4</sup>

The interviewer encouraged participants to interpret the visual images for their personally and culturally created, symbolic meanings, through offering them various conversational openings or question framings. This made it possible for interviewees to take up diverse interpretative stances, while reducing any discomfort at the task's open-endedness, making the task more intelligible and allowing the images to elicit meanings relating to interviewees' own, personal lives.

*Interviewer (MF):* We are just asking you to give some reactions to each of the images? Moving ahead in time ...? I'm not going to give you much context, how do you read that? What's that representing? Can you see any of your own family in that?

By making visual features of the image foci of discussion (e.g. who is standing or seated; at the centre or margins of the photograph), the interviewer sought to

bring out the interpretative significance of the visual to the interviewee, including specific socio-cultural meanings (such as dominance) afforded by representing aspects of parenting identities, practices and relationships in visual mode.

*Joe:* The dad's the focal point isn't he – in the first one you look at the dad and the kids there's no, you can't see any love there ...

*I:* No. I mean there's something ... about him being in the centre.

*Joe:* The central role in the family 'I'm the ...' yeah that's what I'm saying, the disciplinarian 'I'm here, this is my family, I'm in charge' you know literally 'I'm the daddy' you know ... She's very much, she's kind of out in the corner 'I'm the wife but I'm over here' you know.

The sequential organisation of the set of images as a visual narrative was, specifically, brought into play in the discussion, to facilitate reflections in and through time on movement, continuities and changes in perspective.

*Marcus:* That's more where I see myself being.

*I:* So you think we've moved, changed, the representation's got more what?

*Marcus:* I think maybe it's got more tactile and more emotional and less functional.

The sequence picture of a Victorian father overwhelmingly elicited a negative response from participants who saw it as an outdated mode of fathering, as with the collage image. The father was construed as unemotional, distant from the family and the men failed to identify with it in terms of their own experiences or expectations; for them it remained a model of fatherhood rooted firmly in the past. Reactions to the 1950's image portraying a father kissing his housewife and children goodbye before leaving for work received somewhat more mixed reactions. Whilst most of the men recognised it as depicting a clear breadwinner/housewife divide that would not be emulated in their own expectations, some of the men viewed the image positively by identifying with the man's role as provider, although still saying the father seemed too distant and roles were unequal.

*William:* Yeah that goes back to the working father, just come home from work and loves his family, is providing for them and food on the table. But it's very much stereotypical with her at home looking after the kids and him going out being the breadwinner .... The fact that he is able to provide for his family, earn enough money, he's got the pride from doing that, that's appealing, um so there are elements of that that will be in my relationship. But I don't want the child to see two separate parents work and looking after, I want it to be quite equal really, if you know what I mean.

As the sequence progressed, participants felt better able to identify with the fathers who were depicted as involved with their children, as these images were closer to the men's experiences and expectations of what their own fathering would involve.





Figure 32.2 2007 image of modern father; reproduced with permission from copyright holder.

Engaging with visual representations of historical and modern themes enabled the participants to identify aspects of the past in the present and how they remained relevant for their understandings today (Henwood *et al.*, 2008a). The visual representation of socio-cultural shifts from a distant father to one playing with his child, to physical – and then emotional – bonding between them, facilitated talk of tensions in the men's identificatory imaginings (Finn and Henwood, 2009) of themselves as modern (involved, nurturing) fathers (Figure 32.2).

Some of these tensions were ambiguous and difficult to detect, and may not otherwise have been accessed through talk alone. One example is the re-emergence of protection as a stubborn particular of paternal subjectivity: against the general perception that the modern father is better, visibly stronger masculinity and protectiveness remained tied together. Another is where images of the involved, interactive father come to be seen as objects of female desire.

Presenting images individually, with detailed probing of responses, led to much more detailed data from the sequence of images than had been obtained from the collage. This strategy led participants to comment on each picture, whilst the sequence also encouraged an element of comparison across time. The sequential narrative led participants to re-evaluate their responses as the sequence progressed, meaning each picture was framed by previous responses and influenced subsequent ones. This re-framing is particularly evident in Richard's case. Initially, after fairly negative responses to the first two images, Richard had a positive response to the 1980's image:

That's nice 'cause I like the fact the father's playing with the child and supporting the child, and the fact they're all three engaged in the same activity so you've got two children and a father engaged in the same thing.

In his response he emphasises the engagement between father and child that was not evident in pictures of previous generations. However, when presented with a present-day image, Richard re-appraises his earlier view and depicts the 1980's picture in a less positive way:

Um 6 it's interesting 'cause that picture [2007 image] says to me something more about engagement than the previous picture [1980's image] did; I think the previous picture talked to me about support actually, it was possibly the positioning and the fact that the father's supporting the child in the buggy but it did say something to me about actually the father's role in supporting the children ... Whereas that [2007 image] says something more to me about engagement; the fact they're laughing at each other so they've got eye to eye contact.

Kevin also re-appraised his comments in light of subsequent pictures. Initially, Kevin was critical of the Victorian and 1950's images as showing an outdated mode of fathering from his own perspective, commenting on how unhappy he thought the individuals looked. However after viewing some more contemporary images, there was an apparent shift as Kevin reconsiders his earlier comments:

My take on it now ... in some way the earlier photos are far better because there's structure, there's more, there was more of a niceness about some of it, you know, more gentlemanly. But now there's no, day to day – and I've only started noticing it more definitely since I found out I'm going to be a father – is how people interact with their children, and I'm finding a lot of it appalling that you know swearing in front of children and screaming and arguing with their wives ... I'm not one to pass judgement but ... they're horrible – and they portray such a horrible image of what society, you think perhaps the 1950s was better.

It appears that these insights and re-appraisals are particular to the sequential technique, which encourages participants to give a focused answer on one image, yet each response is inevitably influenced by those images that have gone before. Presenting the images in a collage format is unlikely to elicit such responses as it does not set up temporal comparisons in the same way as the sequence. By using a sequential narrative and more focused probing, participants gradually developed their responses, allowing us access to apparent contradictions and adjustments that are played out.

By displaying the sequence of images at the end of the interview, participants were able to refer back to and expand upon points they had mentioned earlier, but it also presented an opportunity to raise new issues that would otherwise have been

overlooked. However, whilst there were several disadvantages inherent in the collage technique, by allowing participants to select images they were drawn to gave the researcher an insight into aspects of fatherhood that were particularly important for the men (for example, the father's role as teacher), which were not so apparent in the sequence.

From these studies we have identified photo-elicitation as a useful supplementary interview technique, particularly for complex discussions around temporality and personal experiences of cultural change. Whilst the technique itself requires careful contemplation, it is also important to consider the stage in the interview at which images will be presented and the depth of probing that will follow, given their impact on the data produced. Using images early on in the interview can set up expectations, whilst incorporating them towards the end allows for expansion of existing themes and facilitates the introduction of themes which may otherwise have been overlooked.

### **Using personal photographs**

As a third strategy for expanding our use of visual methods, participants were asked to provide a few of their personal photographs for discussion in the interview. The aim was to generate images that could evoke more memories and emotions embedded in biographical experience, exploring their temporal extensions (Adam, 1995) in everyday life to reveal more about the temporal organisation of the lived experiences of men and fathers. We first introduced this strategy when participants in the East Anglia sample were re-interviewed 8 years after their first child's birth, and so were familiar with the research and potentially had a range of pictures to select from. The technique was subsequently developed with our South Wales sample during their third interview, a year after their child's birth.

Well-known drawbacks to using personal photographs, documented elsewhere, are that they represent an 'ideal' form of family life rather than a reality, a presentation of what families want outsiders to see, and are produced with particular purposes and viewing contexts in mind, a research interview not being one of them (Rose, 2007). Conversely, visual researchers advocating their use (Kuhn, 2007) suggest that self-generated images make accessible biographical memories and emotions that are otherwise inaccessible using e.g. life history interview methods. What is of interest to us in our project is exploring how, given their generation by participants rather than by us as researchers, such photographs potentially offer a quite different way to inquire into our participants' life and temporal experiences, and generate data on processes of personal and social change.

We did not ask men to analyse the pictures: this may have been difficult and uncomfortable for some of them. Rather we asked them to tell us about especially liked images, and ones they felt were a good representation of their fathering. Interestingly, for several of the fathers, the fact that the pictures did not represent an accurate picture of daily family life was the reason they liked them.

*Simon:* This is by far currently my favourite picture ...

*I:* It's a very happy, smiley photo

*Simon:* But reflecting on that in particular, you know it's, the key issue here is that all three of them are happy and that is so not normal, that's the thing

*I:* So not normal?

*Simon:* It's, you know because of everything that we talked about before, there's always, well not always, it's so common; one of the great drags has been one of them, one or the other, being grumpy at some stage all the time. And you know just 'cause of this sort of competition of being a three and there's not enough of us to go round to pay enough attention to three demanding individuals all at the same time and give them all what they want. So um, so these moments of all three being happy are wonderful moments and you know the more the merrier I would say. So that's what makes me smile about that one.

Like Simon, other interviewees tended to select pictures of their children only, rather than presenting pictures that represented their fathering.<sup>5</sup> In addition to talking about why the picture was selected, the men were asked how they felt about the pictures, and the general response from the men looking at photographs of their children was one of pride. Similarly, when the men themselves were in the pictures and asked how they felt at that time, the most frequent response was 'proud'.

*I:* So who is he though, how does he feel? [pointing to picture of participant]

*Malcolm:* Proud ... Um 'cause they're close, they're showing they're happy, I think it shows, conceitedly how good looking they are. I don't know, it's just I'm proud, just a proud dad actually that's what it is, that's my kids, it's good.

Mothers were frequently absent from the selected pictures – usually explained by the fact that they were taking the picture – and their absence was commented on by several of the men.

We face a number of challenges in using such personal photographs. The utility of this technique is inevitably influenced by how participants use and collect them, which varies widely among participants. The majority of men kept family albums, most frequently in digital form, and were able to select favourites from this that they were happy to share with us. But, as with any data, the meanings are not transparent, and it is proving more difficult to generate the necessary kinds of interpretations, reflections and reflexivity that work up the significance of such personal photographs with regard to the men's lives and their ways of living with others in contemporary times. Moreover, some men did not value photographs, and so felt using them in the interview would not be fruitful. As we proceed with analysing our photo-elicitation data, using the collage and visual sequence techniques alongside our QLL interviews, we have begun to chart its significance, for example, for the kinds of lifecourse disruptions and fateful moments that contribute to personal lives and change in the making (Shirani and Henwood,

2011a, 2011b). The methodological challenge remains, however, to generate insights from our personal photograph data to contribute to our analytical work.

### **Our use of visual methods beyond the men-as-fathers project**

The insights and experience we gained from using visual methods in our fatherhood research have informed our work on subsequent projects, leading us to include visual approaches as an important component of our work. Elsewhere, we have documented the photo-elicitation task (Henwood *et al.*, 2017), photo-narrative and video discussion tasks (Shirani *et al.*, 2015) that were a central component of our Energy Biographies research project. In particular, we have explored the utility of visual approaches in enabling participants to talk about the future (Shirani *et al.*, 2015), given that working across temporalities is an important aspect of QLL research. Analysis of this work led us to conclude that having a tangible reference point in an image was a helpful anchor point for participants to discuss, more concretely, how their lives may be different in the future. We also found that use of video helped to open up discussion of wider social futures (although it may be more challenging to find relevant representations in other areas of research). Our current work as part of the FLEXIS project will involve further methodological developments, moving beyond the discussion of photographs and film to encompass other techniques designed to help participants to talk about difficult issues.

### **Concluding remarks**

When employing photo-elicitation methods in research, there are many matters of method and technique to be considered. How will images be presented – simultaneously or sequentially? When in the interview/research relationship will the images be used? Will personal photographs be pre-requested or discussed spontaneously? These considerations have a substantial bearing on the data produced and their relevance for the research project.

Based on our comparisons, and reflections on methods inspired by them, we would be cautious about invoking prior methodological commitments regarding the particular value of ways of producing and presenting visual material in photo-elicitation studies. We have constructively critiqued our own use of photo collages. Our suggestion is that, while they do, indeed, have limitations as we have used them, and so require further development, they can elicit responses to different expectations, norms and ideals, enable talk about hopes, fears and anticipated difficulties and generally create conditions where speaking subjects can articulate researchable meanings.

Participant-generated images/personal photos are often seen as especially valuable when researchers wish to avoid imposing frames of reference on respondents' ways of seeing and telling, simply through their choice of pre-given visual materials. Our study has been especially successful in eliciting verbal data,

reflexively linked to a researcher-generated sequence of changing socio-cultural representations of men as fathers, using pre-existing images. We conclude that engaging participants in the interpretation of visual narratives presented in visual mode can be methodologically appropriate, providing a reference point through which participants can represent aspects of their own reality to the researcher.

In our work to date we have primarily used images as a tool to generate talk, emulating a traditional model of photo-elicitation, which has been critiqued for minimising the visual properties of the image (Travers, 2011; Allan and Tinkler, 2015). Whilst we have not prioritised the analysis of images produced in our research as stand-alone entities, we have explored opportunities for this as part of a public exhibition and multimodal methods workshop (see Henwood *et al.*, 2017).

Has using visual methods strengthened our broader methodological project of developing QLL research, and our analytical work of studying the dynamics of men-as-fathers' identities in the making? Our contextualisation of modern fatherhood within the flow of a dominant socio-historical representation of fatherhood and masculinities has elicited data on men's identificatory imaginings, and how these ebb and flow in and through biographical and generational time (Finn and Henwood, 2009). QLL study is known for using time as a vehicle and topic of analysis (Neale, 2008); our visual narrative photo-elicitation technique adds to this repertoire and supports the development of the work. Nonetheless, there is far more to be done to develop the innovativeness of a wide range of visual methods within QLL study, drawing attention to questions of movement, change and point of view, and focusing on sequential acts of meaning making in different modalities.

## Notes

- 1 The study is part of a cross-disciplinary network (Timescapes) comprising a set of seven qualitative, empirical studies conducting research in a variety of locations throughout the UK, and collectively utilising qualitative longitudinal (QLL) methods to inquire into continuities and changes in relationships and identities at different stages across the lifecourse.
- 2 These theoretical approaches are variously called discursive, critical social psychological, psychodiscursive and psychosocial. For some discussion of what lies behind the variation in labelling see Finn and Henwood (2009).
- 3 Since the chapter was written, we collected responses to five contemporary images of fatherhood and masculinity in 2009; however, this aspect of the study is not considered here.
- 4 In addition to temporality, we took steps to intensify discussion of issues of masculinity in connection with fatherhood. The famous 1980s Athena 'man and baby' image was used to represent a cultural turning point in depictions of fatherhood and masculinity. along with a recent reproduction of this by rugby player Ben Cohen. Images of David Beckham and son, and the father from the TV programme *Shameless* were included as culturally recognisable fathers who participants may already hold an opinion about.
- 5 Favourite pictures of the children were school photos, holiday snaps or pictures from a momentous occasion such as a wedding, when these photographs were representative of a particular moment or memory. For others impromptu photographs were preferable as they captured the children naturally.

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# ON UTILISING A VISUAL METHODOLOGY

## Shared reflections and tensions

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This chapter draws on the shared reflections and tensions from collaborative research in an experience sampling method (ESM) project exploring the use of the visual, particularly photography, in investigating everyday life experiences. The research was conducted among work colleagues at a higher education institution. In the current project, further developing the ESM method, participants photographed their activity at preprogrammed times, taped oral descriptions of activities and answered questionnaires concerning the activity and their subjective assessment of the activity. This enabled the building of a pictured account of everyday experience.

When the group reflected on the process of the research and potential interpretations of data, ethical issues became apparent. In this chapter, in line with the critical perspective of the book, we take the opportunity to reflect upon these ethical issues, privileging dissenting voices in the group reflections. The chapter documents the tensions inherent in the visual research focusing on power relations, with the intention of rethinking and reconceptualising well-worn assumptions and structured formal ethical guidelines around informed consent, privacy in research contexts and reflexivity. In this sense, this chapter discusses the following key issues: power dynamics in the immediate audience of co-workers and academic members; the impact of the audience on the photographs; the inclusion of members' reflections on the process; questions around self-reflection in the use of photographs; and issues of confidentiality and anonymity in the visual. In conclusion, we highlight the importance of a critical debate around ethics in visual methodologies, and the claim that reflexivity has to be at the kernel of the research process.

## **Visual methods in social sciences**

The visual is attracting increasing interest in social science research and, more recently, within psychology (Reavey and Johnson, 2008). Rose (2007) notes that photographic images, whether moving or still, are currently the most popular sort of image being created by social scientists because they can carry or evoke three dimensions of experience (information, affect and reflection) particularly well.

The polysemic (having multiple meanings) nature of the visual, as opposed to the mono-modal form of word-based text, has prompted Ruby (2005) to call for attention to social processes surrounding visual objects – a need to ask the same critical question of the eye as the voice, rather than assuming broad similarities. As such, the possibilities for visual information to offer different perspectives on the experience of everyday life have yet to be fully explored.

## **Reflexivity in visual methods**

Research ethics are particularly important in visual methodologies (Rose, 2007). Given its visual content, issues such as anonymity are of particular importance. Ethical concerns related to visual methodology in researching everyday life and working relations should also be carefully considered. A central feature of the analytical interrogation of much qualitative data concerns reflexivity. In textual work, reflexivity tends to revolve around the position of the researcher and the impact the researcher characteristics might have on their subsequent interpretation of the data. The use of reflexivity in textual/verbal work tends to be a textual representation of the researcher in relation to a number of positional places and relationships (i.e. to participants, to data). However, image-based research requires the incorporation of other elements for reflexivity which are not dependent on verbal explication. For example, Pink (2001: 96) advocates a reflexive approach towards the collation and analysis of visual data which does not depend on translating ‘visual evidence’ into ‘verbal knowledge’ but exploring the relationship between the visual and the social and cultural contexts of knowledge production. Within this, issues such as construction and representation within the visual need careful exploration in terms of what and how knowledge is produced. In this respect, Wright (1999) makes the point that interpreting photographs involves a ‘looking at’ and ‘looking behind’ the picture. It is the careful interpretation of reflexivity and ethics around the visual that we explore in this chapter.

Rose (2007) highlights three contexts to be taken into account for the meaning production of visual work. These are: ‘the site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences’ (Rose, 2007: 13). Rose (2007) argues that, for critical research, each of these sites should be seen in relation to three modalities: the technological (the apparatus), compositional (formal strategies to compose an image) and the social (economic, political, social relations surrounding an image). In this chapter we critically discuss the technological apparatus (e.g. meanings of the photographic camera), the compositional aspects (e.g. the impact of the immediate and broader audiences in

choices of snapshots) and the social, political and social relation aspects in the production of images (i.e. picture taking within the institutional context).

### **The current project**

The research described in this chapter draws on our shared reflections arising from a pilot project conducted within a participatory action research approach to explore ESM and the use of the visual in investigating everyday life experiences.

The ESM has been used for investigating everyday life experience, the relationship between the activity undertaken, skills, challenge and subjective experiences of well-being, focusing particularly around the role of enjoyment (Clarke and Haworth, 1994; Haworth *et al.*, 1997). Delle Fave (2007) notes that the ESM can be used to capture emotions, motivations and cognitive processes as they occur, an important tool for retrospective methods, though the ESM is seen as complementing and not replacing other research methods. Further consideration of the method and the data from this project can be found elsewhere (Hektner *et al.*, 2007; Kellock *et al.*, 2011).

The inclusion of photography as part of the ESM was initially used to study slices of time for the political-poetic statement on 'The Way We Are Now' project (Haworth, 2010),<sup>1</sup> developed from practice-led research into creativity and embodied mind in digital fine art.<sup>2</sup> Haworth (2010: 15) comments that there are a number of interpretive possibilities afforded by this visual method, including an artistic object for contemplation; as individual visual profiles for comparative research; or as analysis of themes across a group of individuals, and between groups.

The research described in this chapter was conducted among a collective group of higher education staff (the social context). The co-researchers ( $n = 13$ ) were work colleagues: supervisors, managers, students and support staff. Some have been previously engaged with the use of visual methods, participatory research and ethical issues in research (Mountian, 2009; Woolrych and Sixsmith, 2008). The key focus of the project was for the team to produce individual stories of their everyday life over the period of one week. The participatory approach included participants' involvement in the design of the project, set-up of aims and objectives and joint discussions over the data collected.

The ESM uses questionnaire diaries and electronic pagers which are preprogrammed to beep at randomly selected times during the day to indicate response times. In the current project, a mobile phone was used to signal participants eight times a day, between 9:30 a.m. and 9:30 p.m. during a week, in which the Monday was a bank holiday. At each signal, participants photographed their situation/activity, tape-recorded their assessments and impressions of the activity or any other comment and answered six questions on the activity and subjective experience concerning enjoyment, interest, challenge, skills, visual interest and contentment. In addition, each participant completed a written individual reflection on their participation in the research process. A rich visual display was then created for each individual in the form of large posters. Individual

images were also placed alongside the responses to questions in a data book that was compiled along with the individual reflections.

A focus group discussion was organised in which experiences of participation in the project were explored, taking the data book as discussion stimulus. Reflection is considered an important dimension of participatory action research (Reason, 1988) and, as such, individual and group reflections have become an integral part of the current research project.

In this research, both visual and verbal data were, therefore, included in a three-part process: (1) picture taking and verbal description of the context of the picture, as photo-documentation, 'using photographs as documentary evidence' (Rose, 2007: 239); (2) individual reflections on the photos; and (3) focus group discussions of the research experience, using the snapshots to elicit the discussion, as photo-elicitation, the use of photographs 'as eliciting material for interviews' (Rose, 2007: 239). The extracts explored in this chapter derive from the visual data, focus group discussions and individual reflections. The following analysis centres on a number of emerging issues concerning power relations in research, ethics in research and reflexivity.

### **Mapping power, reflexivity and ethics**

A number of issues emerged from this pilot research concerning power and ethics in research, and particularly in relation to participatory action research (Burton and Kagan, 1996) and visual methodology (Jevic and Springgay, 2008). Beyond differences of power between 'participants' and 'researchers' (even though this was participatory research), issues of power related to the work place have had an impact on the research in various ways, particularly within the visual. For example, the interdependencies of power and work context were revealed in participants' choice of pictures taken and comments made in relation to the photographs.

Furthermore, in the context of participatory research where participants were both participants and 'researchers', reflexivity is a particularly intricate process. Reflexivity is a part of the research in which researchers reflect upon their analysis and the research process. Reflexivity and issues of power in research have been a key issue for qualitative research, and particularly for feminist research (Batsleer and Humphries, 2000; Burman, 1997; Harding, 1996; Oakley, 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1990). However, there is still a tendency in qualitative research to interpret subjective experiences as an individual characteristic or impression. Rather, as Parker (2005: 25) points out: 'reflexivity is [should be] a way of *attending to the institutional location of historical and personal aspects of the research relationship*' (italics in original).

Foucault's (1991, 1998) work on power is crucial to articulate and deconstruct the various power positions taken in research, that of the institution, including academic institutions, of the research process (relationship between participants and researchers) and, in this case, of work relations. Power in this sense is not seen as an individual characteristic, but related to social structures, to structural power (hierarchical positions, differences in gender, race, class and so on), to techniques and rituals of

power which are historically located. In this way the examples cited in this chapter are not read as individual characteristics, but rather as reflections on how power operates within academic settings, work relations and research dynamics.

Taking into account these power dynamics, reflexivity becomes fundamental to the analysis of the research, however, at the same time, these power relations may also appear in the reflexivity process itself, e.g. participants may not feel comfortable to comment openly about their ideas and motivations regarding the research process or to tell their motivations for choosing a specific snapshot. This requires us to rethink and reconsider reflexivity, particularly in relation to visual methods. Jevic and Springgay (2008) also comment on the tensions of joint work between researchers and students, and state that, crucially, visual methods ‘embrace proximity by understanding art making, researching, and teaching as living practices and as relational encounters that are provocative, hesitant, and complicated’ (p. 67).

In this chapter we focus on some key aspects of power relations and ethics in research emerging from this pilot project. These include: (1) power dynamics between co-workers and co-researchers; (2) the impact of audience on the composition of photographs; (3) the inclusion of participants in the reflections; (4) questions around self-reflection in the use of photographs; and (5) confidentiality and anonymity in visual methods. Particular issues concerning visual methods in relation to ethics and reflexivity will be further discussed through the examples cited in this paper. The analysis is based on the material generated in the first (individual reflections, photo-documentation) and second (focus groups, photo-elicitation) stages of the research. All the quotes in the paper are from group discussions unless otherwise stated (i.e. individual reflections).

## **Power dynamics in research**

### ***Academic practice and its constraints***

The academic practice of research has its constraints and limitations. Clarity and transparency of research objectives and methods are of paramount importance to participants. Notwithstanding this, there are certain elements that are not or cannot be easily disclosed, thus the researcher is placed in a specific power position in relation to the participant. Some of these elements are, for example, how the material is going to be interpreted (e.g. the theoretical resources of analysis) and how it is going to be disseminated (e.g. the wide scope of dissemination). These elements, in the case of this research project, provoked some anxieties in some of the participants. Two participants in fact opted to withdraw from the research. Some participants commented:

You don’t know what it is that you’re looking at, is it the activity or the environment or the object or (...) I can’t see how these questions wouldn’t be misinterpreted by different people.

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This comment is seen here in relation to the interpretation of data. This theme reappears in the next example:

This project felt more like work and felt invasive – to have my life exposed and discussed.

*(individual reflection)*

Here a number of issues appear intermingled: first, the participant did not feel comfortable in the position of the participant (life exposed and discussed); second, because the researchers are work colleagues, this might have put an extra weight on the idea of ‘exposure’; and particularly in the context of a visual research project, photo taking might represent another perspective within exposure, where participants may not feel comfortable to share snapshots of their private life with their colleagues and line managers.

Furthermore, although this research and pilot project was of a participatory action research perspective, questions around who is in charge of the research, and who has voice, still permeated the research process and outputs. There are some specificities of visual methods that we should also consider, as some participants expressed an unease around the sharing of the photographs (data) both to each other and to a wider audience, as seen in the next example:

regarding the issue of showing the photographs ... if this issue is causing angst between us people who are active researchers – what of those we are working with? How can we make decisions about data and participants?

This example points to some aspects of visual methods wherein added pressures and anxieties regarding the exposure of the photographs and interpretation are described.

Regarding the research method and control over the data, some participants commented:

I did not enjoy taking part in the project – for practical, personal and epistemological reasons. (...) I would have preferred to have been in control of when and where to record my states of well-being.<sup>3</sup>

*(individual reflection)*

she would say: quick take a picture of me [and] I said it doesn't work like that, you know I don't get a choice when to take it, it's just like when you are having a real good time, (...) well what's the point if it's well-being.

In these extracts participants pointed out specific aspects related to the research project, that is, of recording their activities according to pre-arranged times. These comments also highlight participants' anxieties regarding the control over the data generated by them, i.e. on the decision surrounding when to take snapshots.

## **Ongoing work relationships**

Reflections on how the different professional positions of co-researchers in the academic institution impacted on the image production are further developed here, addressing the importance of the social, political and socio-relational context of the research.

First, there was the potential pressure to participate in the research, as participants who are in vulnerable positions may well feel that participation is important in being part of a wider research culture. Second, and crucially, in the analysis of the pictures taken and discussions in the focus groups, concerns and anxieties were expressed particularly by those in more vulnerable work positions, such as those in temporary or short-term contracts and/or not well established in their careers. Some participants reflected their concern in showing pictures that portrayed them in working activities:

the impact [of the research] on the participant has to be taken into account (...), so look at some of this week [pictures] and you see lots of computer screens

In this extract it is pointed out how a great number of the weekly pictures taken by the group are pictures of computer screens (Figure 33.1); in fact, most prominent in the snapshots of participants who were in less-established academic positions. This is one mode of academic work, while other researchers were more involved in other academic activities, such as meetings and discussions, which were also portrayed in their week snapshots. This made us reflect on the reasons why work-related pictures dominated this research. On the one hand, of course, these activities are part of the academic type of work; however, on the other hand, we highlight how some participants felt compelled to show more work-related pictures, as further discussed in this section. This is an outcome that can be related to the social and institutional context of the project, conducted among work colleagues.

The next extract also highlights this aspect:

I'm often not doing the same activity in two pictures in a row (...), whereas other people I've seen you know kind of picture after picture almost that they are doing the same activity [computer screens].

Here, a participant comments on the perceived work effort being sustained over time. There is an explicit comparison with others who seem to be more fastidious in spending time on a particular task, such as sitting in front of a computer screen.

Issues concerning the private-public divide, and more precisely, private life and research in the work environment are pointed out next. Here key issues regarding suspicion and vigilance were highlighted by some participants:

I think it is a very invasive technique and it makes the participant extremely vulnerable because we are exposing our life to a number of researchers and on top of everything to our work colleagues.



Figure 33.1 Example of a week portrait, where computer screens and work-related activities are predominant.

In this extract, exposure and invasion were raised as themes for this participant. The visual content of the research might have added an extra pressure in these ideas of exposure. Moreover, reflecting on the rites and instruments of power (Foucault, 1998), we consider how the mobile camera (the technological apparatus) was itself taken up as an instrument of surveillance and vigilance. This is further developed in the next section.



## **Impact of audience on the composition of photographs**

The impact of the audience (the immediate group and the wider audience) in the research process is a key aspect to be taken into account in the use of visual methods, that is, how participants' awareness of the wider and immediate audience impact on the choices of pictures to be taken (compositional aspects). Two main issues are highlighted here in relation to the choices of pictures taken in this project: first, how participants negotiate the boundaries between the private and the public; and second, the impact of the immediate audience of colleagues and co-researchers and wider audiences (e.g. dissemination, including conference presentations and articles).

The boundaries between public and private are seen here in relation to power position in discourse (Oakley, 1981). This dynamic related to the public–private divide is seen in practice when awareness of audience inhibited participants in sharing pictures that could depict them in uncomfortable situations (in relation to wider audiences) and where these were portraying an image that did not match to that of the 'hard worker' (in relation to the immediate group: work colleagues and co-researchers). Some examples regarding the impact of the wider audiences are pointed out:

If a participant decides to have a look at his life in an in-depth way and (...) [to] think about it, it can be enriching but once it [the picture] is exposed it [this exercise] stops being so much this opportunity for more analytic thinking, [when] it comes to the public – the space of the private is broken, so the pictures are taken being aware that there is a public ...

The more public you make it the less accuracy [in terms of the research] you are going to get.

One participant went further to conclude that:

The output others will see is a simple form of voyeuristic art that will act in only a limited way as a catalyst for environment and well-being but won't relate to the subject.

These extracts point to some deadlocks of research, i.e. the limits and difficulties of visual methods in research. Regarding the impact of the immediate audience (work colleagues) in the research, the next extract highlights the concern of the image of the hard worker:

I did cheat, I am afraid, but by not doing something ... I did not play a computer game all week as I did not want the beep to go off whilst I was playing a game so I presume the phone 'watching' me made me do more work.

*(individual reflection)*

In fact, in this particular example, it is possible to reflect on the technological apparatus (mobile phone) operating as a regulatory device, embodying a specific gaze (Foucault, 1991), in which the participant would respond accordingly, by curtailing desired activities in favour of those perceived as socially acceptable. Moreover, the confession style (Foucault, 1998) of the participant is clear when admitting she cheated. This brings forth the power relations of research and participant, and the embodiment of power in particular mechanisms and instruments, more precisely, in the mobile phone.

### **Inclusion of members' reflection on the process**

Two aspects are emphasised here: first, the limits of participation in the research, whereby not all participants felt comfortable discussing their reflections and concerns in showing photographs of their private lives to colleagues. Second, regarding the visual methodology, there was a sense that the visual needed support from the verbal, i.e. they wanted to add explanation to the visual.

As a group of social science researchers they wanted to talk about the pictures. Further, some participants highlighted that representation was an issue – this is not my real self, not a typical week or this is missing out key parts of my day. This authenticity argument seems not in tune with criteria to assess qualitative data where richness, transparency and multiple meanings are key. As Pinney (2004: 8) points out, photos can only be compressed performances. Accuracy and representation were further discussed in relation to the objective of the project and the textual/verbal comments about subjective appreciation of activities undertaken in the snapshots:

I'm struggling that we are not considering how this [the snapshots and verbal accounts] doesn't represent well-being um (...) we can go back and see what it has achieved but we are not being critical about what it hasn't achieved.

Regarding representation and participation in the research, participants commented:

some people don't feel as if they have participated (...) You know well everybody feels they've participated but not in a participative framework.

Some people feel that they have been almost you know the subjects of the research rather than participants.

Here participants expressed that the visual and textual data from the project seem to feature them as subjects rather than co-participants. It is interesting to analyse these comments within the frame of participatory research, where participants are co-researchers, and yet there were still some preconceived ideas about research that permeated this pilot project, such as who is in control of the research and analysis. The participatory approach involved focus groups and individual reflections for consultation, shared interpretation and negotiation of data showing.

Furthermore, Piper and Frankham (2007) note that the mimetic (resemblance or representation) quality of photographs can serve as a trap where photos pose as singular truths whereas other forms of data (such as verbalisations) move subject positions around. In a piece of word-based text, individuals can shift subject positions whereas photos may locate people in a fixed position (e.g. as lonely, popular, motherly). As a group of researchers particularly interested in qualitative work, photographs may well have positioned individuals more firmly than desired and in ways which contradict their usual social positioning within verbal or written text.

This is quite an interesting process just in terms of those mechanisms because, because we've got that, that we are well that whole week essentially in that state of objective self-awareness we are objectifying ourselves (...) With the camera. Then even if we have forgotten that, when the alarm [mobile signal] goes we are thrown into that.

In this extract some characteristics of visual methods are highlighted, such as the fixity of the photographic image, and in this case, the self-awareness and objectification that the visual promotes.

### **Questions around self-reflection in the use of photographs**

Participants reflected on the therapeutic use of photo-taking. As in any method in research, ethical concerns of those in vulnerable positions are chief (e.g. people who are distressed, traumatised). Notwithstanding this, research is not a neutral device, since specific questions can trigger memories and thoughts that participants cannot always foresee. In the case of visual methodologies this is of particular importance. The visual can act as a reminder and as a trigger of memories and thoughts (Rose, 2007), which can be seen as a powerful device for reflecting upon everyday life.

In this pilot project, some participants felt that the snapshots of their everyday lives provided them an opportunity to reflect upon their situation, by raising awareness of the taking-for-grantedness of everyday life and re-signification of meaning, and the importance of recognising environments, contexts, events and people.

I really enjoyed it and it made me question what I do with my life.  
*(individual reflection)*

I should spend less time watching TV!  
*(individual reflection)*

However, some participants did not in fact feel prepared for this exercise:

but you can imagine maybe if you did get something back that did make your life look dreadful and is too much work and not enough leisure or

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whatever, whatever you could form some kind of judgement and I suppose (...), that's where I got this feeling that X was talking about particularly the unintended outcomes of being shown that visual product to yourself and what other people are thinking of you.

[If] somebody is not happy in their life whatever representation that that sort of how that manifests itself is going to be emotionally quite challenging.

These extracts illustrate how the visual and particularly the visual in research about everyday life presents, on the one hand, a possibility for self-reflection and on the other hand, self-reflection triggered by the visual can appear as challenging for some participants, to look at a week in pictures and to reflect upon them. Within this, some participants commented on strategies to picture their daily routines in different ways, as seen below:

if I was watching telly and it was something I took a picture because an alarm went off and then I was watching something I think I would think myself as an object (...) oh I'll still be watching telly and I'd take a picture of the dog (...) not exactly what's happening but gosh a few pictures in a row of *Coronation Street* (...) But what I was thinking about it there might have been a slight engineering of that because I've never been conscious of God I've taken another picture of watching telly you know looks like a couch potato.

In these extracts it is possible to see how snapshots provided participants with a space for self-reflection. Participants pointed out the exercise as a potential trigger for self-reflection and change. Nonetheless, the impact of the immediate and wider audiences on the exercise can also be seen in this outcome, as some felt wary and under surveillance, and used strategies to depict their everyday life in different ways. In fact, it is possible to note in the above extracts that self-awareness appears intertwined with a public gaze.

### **Confidentiality and anonymity**

A key issue in visual methodologies is anonymity and confidentiality. As Parker (2005) points out, confidentiality cannot be ensured in qualitative research, as the details of participants' lives are examined and disseminated; however, anonymity can be insured. However, Parker highlights that anonymity has also to be reviewed in research, treated as an ethical question (Parker, 2005: 17), e.g. is the research being used as a way to further marginalise vulnerable people or to give voice to them, are ethics being used to protect the researcher or the participant?

In the case of visual methodologies, current ethical guidelines (British Psychological Society, 2006) for research highlight that participants must provide consent for the reproduction of their visual material. As well as protecting the participants, such consent can also serve as legal protection for the researcher. Beyond the legal framework of ethics, ethics in visual methods are particularly

important and need to be further conceptualised. In the case of this pilot project, anxieties regarding anonymity and work relations were expressed by some participants:

although we are all 'equal' and we all kind of know each other and we like the company of each other, it doesn't mean that we'd be happy to share everything and knowing that this information is [going to be] published in this way makes it a non-confidential non-anonymous work.

Regarding constraints of research in the work environment, the next extract highlights that:

I know that we say this is confidential and all the rest of it but say for example if I took a picture of X, God love him, and put a comment this is my colleague I can't stand him, yeah, you know and here we are.

The discussion here relates to ongoing ethical and power dynamics that surround research – as researchers we are well versed in participative and engaged research strategies. However, the showing of data and subsequent analysis presented different challenges which surround the visual – which go beyond ethical guidelines around informed consent. These were related to visual methods and to the limits of this type of research in work environments, which could constrain the research and/or expose participants.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this chapter was to point out some of the tensions and difficulties involved in conducting visual research. A number of issues were raised via a critical examination of a pilot participatory action research approach using ESM and focus group discussions on the topic of subjective well-being and research in the work context. The analysis of pictures and comments from participants (co-researchers) were not read as individuals' characteristics, but rather as means to reflect on the power operations within academic settings, work relations and research dynamics. Although there are a range of critical issues in higher education (Duckett, 2002) to be considered, the analysis we provided focused on institutional power dynamics within the work place and how these dynamics emerge in research, and particularly in visual methods. Stronach *et al.* (2006) make the argument that in visual research what is not said has also to be considered, and this is what we have aimed to address in this chapter.

A range of complexities and tensions were reflected in the pictures (mostly work-related pictures) and in comments during focus groups and individual reflections. Some of these tensions could be seen in the wariness of participants, their feelings of suspicion and surveillance, the perceived pressure to participate in the project and concerns regarding the eventual interpretation of visual data. These were mostly expressed by participants who did not have well-established careers or

did not feel directly in charge of the research and/or methods, pointing out the need to consider the power dynamics in research, and to consider particular aspects of visual methods, such as anonymity, confidentiality and the fixity quality of image. Thus, by privileging dissenting voices, we aimed to address certain power dynamics in research in using visual methods, particularly around informed consent, ethics and reflexivity.

In this chapter we have focused on five main areas: power dynamics and the immediate audience of co-workers and academic members; the impact of the audience on the photographs; the inclusion of members' reflections on the process; questions around self-reflection in the use of photographs; and issues of confidentiality and anonymity in visual data. These aspects account for the technological apparatus, the compositional aspects and the political and social contexts of visual methods.

Within each of these areas, we have focused on the tensions and constraints of the research process. In terms of power and institutional dynamics, participants who were not in well-established academic positions expressed their fears and concerns in diverse ways, including: pressure to participate; taking pictures showing them as hard workers and/or changing their activities during the project; awareness of the immediate public (working colleagues) and wider audiences; not feeling part of the research process and worry about interpretation of data. Key aspects of anonymity and visual methods were also explored.

Our claim here is that visual methodologies and collaborative and participatory action research can function as a means of empowerment to research participants. However, we argue that reflexivity has to be central within the research process, addressed and reflected upon, taking particularly into account the specificities of visual methods. Power has to be crucially considered in relation to the position of the researcher, participants and institution, and these are paramount for research plans, reflections and outcomes.

## Notes

- 1 [www.creativity-embodiedmind.com](http://www.creativity-embodiedmind.com)
- 2 Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK; and research by Haworth (2010) into subjective well-being funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK, [www.wellbeing-esrc.com](http://www.wellbeing-esrc.com)
- 3 This pilot study (ESM) required participants to take snapshots at pre-arranged times.

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