Making the visual invisible: exploring creative forms of dissemination that respect anonymity but retain impact

Dawn Mannay
Cardiff University

* MannayDI@cardiff.ac.uk
Contemporary society is characterised by an occularcentric culture in which the visual image permeates our everyday lives. In social science research the visual has been presented as a tool to fight familiarity, engender participatory practice and provide the basis for reflexive qualitative inquiry. However, the visual images created by participants raise a number of questions in relation to ethical dissemination where concerns such as concealed identities and preserving anonymity become methodologically challenging. A preoccupation with anonymity can act as a resistance to discourses of the ethics of visibility, where participants want to be identified in their visual images; but, once research data are placed in the public domain or re-worked in the media the impact and interpretation of visual images can become extremely difficult to control. In response, this paper explores creative ways of disseminating research, which preserve the potential of visual inquiry while retaining ethical practice. The paper explores different ways of presenting visual research findings so that the affective power of the data production remains without the associated images, enabling the capacity to engage both cognitively and emotionally with an audience. Drawing on a project that adopted techniques of visual data production in the Welsh context, the paper presents the ways in which necessity can become the mother of ethical invention in visual social science research; and why it is sometimes necessary to make the visual invisible both for research participants and non-consenting others.

Keywords: anonymity; confidentiality; creativity; ethics; poetry; visual methods.
Introduction

Visual images within social science research have become ubiquitous as the field has witnessed an increasing move towards visual and creative methods of data production, including photographs, collages, film and walking narratives. The visual offers a range of possibilities for social research but it also brings an array of challenges. Despite the increased use of visual techniques, the ethical guidelines available for researchers do not always provide sufficient reference to the creation and use of imagery, and the key issues of informed consent, confidentiality and ownership (Cox et al 2014).

As Sweetman (2009) argues, in visual research, anonymity and confidentiality are almost impossible to guarantee. Consequently, there has been calls for informed consent to be reconceptualised as something that is not fixed but is fluid, so that the use of images and interview data is continually negotiated with research participants (Cox et al 2014); such participatory practice aims to rebalance the issue of unequal power in the research relationship (Wiles et al 2008). However, once a visual image is created it becomes very difficult to control its use or remove it from the public arena if participants decide that they no longer want to be represented in a fixed visual trope for ‘time immemorial’ (Brady and Brown 2013, p.102).

For Sontag (1977, p.4), ‘photographs that fiddle with the scale of the world, themselves get reduced, blown up, cropped, retouched, doctored, tricked out’ and in a digital age images can be reformatted to tell a different story at the touch of a button. Even where photographs are disseminated in their original format they can still act to tell a different story to the one intended by the researcher, photographer and importantly, the subjects of the photograph themselves. Brown (2009) argues that we are seduced by the truthfulness of the appearance of things in the photograph, as we want to believe in the image. Historically, this seduction has been central in the photograph’s role in a regulatory system that has stigmatised marginalised groups, patients, the poor and colonised races (Spencer 2011; Tagg 2003).

In this way, ‘images can be thought of as icons in which a range of different meanings may be invested... that may not obviously or directly form part of the visible content of the image’ (Pink 2004, p.10). The understanding of the photograph is embedded in the sociocultural and political realm of its viewing and consequently it can take on ‘a life of its own’, presenting a series of different messages rather than the ones intended by its makers or that of the photographed subjects. This can be demonstrated by exploring iconic images in the documentary and journalistic traditions, which are important resources for visual researchers to reflect on when considering the ethics of their own practices.

Migrant Mother is arguably the most famous documentary photograph representing the North American depression of the 1930 and is an example of the need for caution in disseminating visual materials generated in social science research (Curtis 1986). Dorothea Lange was travelling around California in March 1936, documenting the plight of the sharecroppers, displaced farm families, and migrant workers for the Farm Security Administration, part of Roosevelt’s New Deal programme, when she photographed Florence Owens Thompson and her children. The photograph became an icon of American suffering and stoicism and was printed, distributed and consumed in the global media market. The international audience actively made their own meanings from the image and there was a classical distinction between the mimesis (showing) and diegesis (telling); fraught with interpretation and (mis)interpretation (Spencer 2011). As Curtis (1986, p. 1) argues ‘lost in the appreciation of Migrant Mother as a timeless work of art is its personal and cultural genesis’, to explore what has become lost it is important to consider the views of the photographer and the photographed.

In her notes of the encounter with Thompson, Lange wrote: ‘I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was 32. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food’ (Meltzer 2000, p.133). Lange’s images are often singled out because her photos appear to offer compassion to those in the middle of the economic crisis; however, some argue that in creating ragged heroes and heroines Lange actually deflects the true cause of their plight, namely, the structural failure of capitalism (Harper 2012). There was an element of romanticism in Lange’s work and her belief that photography should be restrained and uplifting, even when its subject matter was not. ‘Her subjective take on the purpose of photography and her ability to represent the stoicism of the dispossessed embedded a particular frame on the American consciousness through the art of photography’ (Mannay 2016, p.73).

Lange’s portrait of Thompson was reproduced around the globe, becoming an icon of American suffering and stoicism. The subjects of the photograph remained captured in this trope and Thompson was displeased with her incarceration and the commodification of her image; in a later interview Thompson says of Lange, ‘I wish she hadn’t of taken my picture’ (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, p.65). Despite the popular interpretation of the image, Thompson was not a white American but a Cherokee who had lived on the margins of American society. Gordon (2009) argues that the reputation of the image grew because it symbolised white motherhood and white dustbowl refugees. The photograph may not have garnered such popularity if viewers had known its subject was a Cherokee woman. These ironies highlight the ways in which ‘the simple reading of a photograph can misrepresent both the visual creator and the subject of the image’ (Mannay 2016, p.73).

In relation to images in journalism, Wright (2011, p. 317) argues that although print media can be disparagingly viewed as tomorrow’s fish-and-chip wrapping, the presence or absence of visual images has ‘the power to make or break the worthiness of any news story’. Wright supports this observation by charting the ways in which articles that do not have readily available images for publication do not make the headlines because they lack the impact of the visual metaphor. Wright (2011) revisits the iconic print media image ‘Boy Petrol Bomber, Londonderry 1969’, which contains contradictory metaphors as a young boy, the innocent child, stands wearing a gas mask and holding a petrol bomb.
in his hand. Wright analyses this image by offering the interpretations and insights of the original photographer, Clive Limpkin, and also demonstrating the power of the image by charting the way that it has been canonised through its appearance in a series of murals in Northern Ireland, where each artist casts the boy differently according to their political loyalties.

Wright allowed the image creator to have a voice in the analysis of a found image. However, Limpkin (1972) interprets the image in relation to his own political stance, suggesting a young delinquent on the road to ruin, an interpretation that is juxtaposed to the heroic Republican representation of a boy who is speaking out against the oppression of his community. Wright’s (2011) analysis speaks to this multiplicity of meaning making. However, the Boy Petrol Bomber remains voiceless; his very presence creates the impact of the image but his personal narrative remains silenced beneath the layers of interpretation assigned by the photographer, researcher, discourses of children and childhood, and the subjects of its viewing in the multimodal forms of the print press, books, mural paintings and its online presence (Mannay 2016, p.72).

Images become signs of their times but they can be reformatted and reinvented to act as signs beyond their times,mediating new messages. It is this reinvention and the mediating of new messages that can become problematic when applied to exploring visual productions in social research. The legacy of early anthropological work, which essentialised indigenous peoples with an authoritative voice, was critiqued in postmodernism with a recognition of the ‘indignity of speaking for others’ (Spencer 2011, p.15). However, it is easy to forget the propagandist manipulation of imagery and the management of visibility (Thompson 1994). Therefore, in contemporary visual ethnography it remains important that the original meaning of an image does not become silenced; and that in interpreting visual images, researchers are giving voice rather than simply voicing over, particularly in visual research with a participatory approach. Although visual researchers may disseminate images with an accompanying text which sensitively represents the accounts and meaning making of their participants, if images are reused, reformatted or decontextualized from the original study, then the image can take on ‘a life of its own’. Without this careful contextualisation, the viewers of images can only rely on their own ways of seeing (Berger 1972). This raises ethical issues about those who created the picture, and why, or reflect on the temporal and situated nature of their viewing in relation to the time and place in which the image was created. Visual images may be powerful ways of communicating a story and engaging audiences but they are also inherently risky; as in the case of Migrant Mother and the Boy Petrol Bomber, they create new and different stories and once decontextualised, these shifting tropes can potentially act to harm research participants and create narratives that they would not want to be associated with for ‘time immemorial’ (Brady and Brown 2013, p.102).

Some participants may want some level of anonymity, and some topics may be particularly sensitive (Lomax 2015), in such cases being visible and recognisable may not be practical, possible or ethical. These discourses around the ethics of visibility and invisibility have led to an impasse or crossroads in visual research whereby researchers are increasingly troubled by their ethical and moral obligations (Wiles et al 2011). In response, this paper focuses on the potentialities and challenges associated with visual methodologies. It explores the challenges of visual representation and interpretation, and in doing so, problematises the ethics of visual research in relation to both those pictured in visual images and the non-consenting others to whom they are connected. The paper is interested in the ‘afterlife’ of visual images, their reworking and reinterpretation; I argue that we need to explore creative ways, including poetic forms, to communicate the meanings of visual images without pictures. As discussed in the following sections, these methodological reflections are drawn from contemporary visual studies and my own ethnographic exploration of everyday life in a marginalised locale.

The Study

The discussions in this paper arise from the data set of a four year Economic and Social Research Council-funded project that took place in a marginalised housing area in urbanised south Wales, United Kingdom. The project employed visual techniques, including collage, mapping and photo-elicitation to explore the everyday lives of mothers and their daughters (Mannay 2010, 2013a). The research focused on the ways in which the boundaries of the immediate culture and memories of the past mediate mothers’ and daughter’s educational and employment histories and futures. The project was concerned to engage with research methods that allowed space for subjectivities, listening to individual accounts to offer the opportunity to develop more accurate, complex and differentiated representations of marginalised lives.

Research was conducted in Hystryd [1], a predominantly white urban area, which ranks as one of the most deprived communities in Wales (Welsh Assembly Government 2008). Nine mothers and their daughters participated in the project and as I had previously lived in the area, this shared sense of geography positioned me as ‘experience near’ (Anderson 2002, p. 23). Consequently, it was important to address my position as an indigenous researcher and make a deliberate cognitive effort to question my taken-for-granted assumptions of what I considered to be familiar (Greer 1964; Delamont and Atkinson 1995).

Participant-directed visual data production techniques of photo-elicitation, mapping
and collage were selected to limit the propensity for participants’ accounts to be overshadowed by the enclosed, self-contained world of common understanding (Mannay 2010). Participants took photographs of [2], drew maps of [3], and made collages [4], depicting meaningful places, spaces and activities. Although my institutional ethics committee agreed that visual data could be produced with participants, and the participants agreed that their visual productions could be disseminated, decisions about what should and can be disseminated have had to be continually negotiated and rethought, processes which I will return to later in the paper.

Participants discussed their visual data with me in tape-recorded interviews to ensure that I understood what they intended to communicate (Rose 2001). The elicitation interviews proved essential as many of the meanings that I attached to the visual data were different to those provided by the participants. Images then can be understood not as simple windows to the truth but rather as contested and subject to multiple readings; and asking participants to interpret their images has become standard practice for many social science researchers (Luttrell 2010; Sewell 2011). These interviews acted to clarify the meaning-making of the image creators as the most salient aspect of the visual data, and allowed a more nuanced insight into participants’ everyday worlds.

However, in order to move beyond the everyday and examine intergenerational continuities and discontinuities it was important to develop an approach that allowed for retrospective and speculative engagement. Consequently, ‘possible selves’ (King and Hicks 2007; Lobenstine et al 2004; Markus and Nurius 1986) narratives were also elicited. Participants were asked to produce narratives from the retrospective perspective of their childhood self, describing who they wanted to become (positive possible self), and who they feared becoming (negative possible self); this activity was repeated from the perspective of the present (Mannay 2013b) in stories, collages and drawings, followed by elicitation interviews.

These techniques provided an insight into everyday intergenerational spaces of working-class femininity; however, they also raised issues that were unexpected, sensitive and previously unspoken (Mannay 2011, 2013b). Moreover, participants’ accounts often featured detailed narratives that implicated the non-consenting characters of their stories as the perpetrators or victims of domestic abuse and familial violence. This paper presents a reflection on these techniques focusing on the political, ethical and practical challenges of producing data elicited from creative participant engagement. The paper specifically focuses on the unforeseen outcomes and ethical dilemmas that arose as a result of the ethnographic fieldwork and what this means in relation to visual images and ethical dissemination. In particular the following sections examine how studies that employ visual and creative methods of data production can engender particularly personal accounts from participants, which raise dilemmas around anonymity and consent. Reflecting on the ethnographic experience, the paper moves beyond issues of the immediate concerns of anonymity to a wider application that encompasses the position of research participants, the researcher, and that of individuals who are unaware that they are a focus of research. I go on to consider the ways in which future research can engage with projects of dissemination both creatively and ethically.

**Pandora’s Memories**

As Gabb (2008) argues, in empirical qualitative studies of family life, the researcher inevitably becomes embedded in the personal worlds of those being researched; within these personal worlds the future is often haunted by phantoms of the past, which impact upon the present (de Beauvoir 1949). These concerns can be accentuated when visual techniques of data production are centralised in ethnographic approaches, as the act of both viewing and creating a visual image can engender processes of defamiliarization (Gurevitch 1998). Art, therefore, may be an element that can overcome the confines of language, and open up experience; but in doing so, participants may be confronted with elements of their lives that they do not commonly reflect upon in their everyday existence.

Accessing ‘what lies beneath’ is a central tenet of Hollway’s and Jefferson’s (2000) Free Association Narrative Interview technique; this aims to secure access to concerns, not visible in traditional interviewing, and elicit unconscious logic, not conscious logic, and emotional motivations rather than rational intentions. I have drawn on psychosocial analysis in previous work (Mannay 2013c) and I would argue that this psychoanalytically informed psychosocial approach can be linked with visual data production, as such techniques can enable processes of creative free association and generate an engagement with unconscious conflict.

There are strong objections to taking the tools of psychoanalysis, such as free association, outside of the clinical situation of the ‘consulting room’ (Frosh 2010; Frosh and Emerson 2005). However, in their more recent work, Hollway and Jefferson (2013) refute such challenges and argue that their work is psychoanalytically informed, rather than psychoanalytical; they suggest that there are similarities with qualitative research interviewing, which is characterised by a largely uninterrupted flow of talk with an attentive listener whose role it is to try and understand what is being said. Although such techniques can be seen as effective, there remain ethical considerations that require a level of reflexivity.

Creating visual data can be accompanied by both defamiliarization (Gurevitch 1998), where participants slow down and re-evaluate their lives, and a form of free association where unconscious content is triggered. Consequently, visual creativity contributes to a ‘slow science’, which engenders flexibility and serendipity (Rivoal and Salazar 2013). Importantly, the nature of such creative work can allow a reflection on neglected aspects of the present but it can also be linked to Henriques et al’s (1998) contention that the question of who we are is tied to the memory of who we have been and the imagination of what we might become. In my work with mothers, such creative engagement surfaced memory work that was often characterised by experiences of domestic and familial violence and abuse (Mannay 2011, 2013b). ‘Unsettling stories on emotional social worlds redefine our understandings of harm and distress and reconfigure ideas of responsible knowing’ (Gabb 2010, p. 461); therefore, there is an important responsibility to connect wider audiences with the emotional weight of empirical evidence in such recollections. As Brannan et al (2007, p.401) contend, ‘ethnography can place researchers in a position
to affect change within their fields of enquiry; for this reason, as researchers we need to disseminate our findings in ways that not only contribute to policy debates, offer innovative methodological techniques and further theoretical dialogue, but also connect with readers at an affective level. The visual can be an effective vehicle for accessing emotion and disseminating the power of participants’ accounts. In this way, a ‘politics of recognition’ (Sweetman 2009) may well engender more impact. However, where topics are particularly sensitive (Lomax 2015) and where visual images act to represent, and fix participants, and sometimes their families, for ‘time immemorial’ (Brady and Brown 2013, p.102) is recognition ethical?

If we consider visual methods of data production as both techniques of defamiliarization and tools of free association then we must also realise that they may act to unlock Pandora’s memories. In response, as researchers, we must be ready to meet the challenge of hearing unsettling stories and to negotiate landscapes of trust and confidentiality, while still communicating the salience of participant’s accounts. For Denzin (2009), inquiry is, at all times, political and moral. It is also important to consider that when we make our participants visible by publishing their visual images ‘we can also make their family, friends and the actual people who form the characters in their accounts visible through association’ (Mannay 2016, p.123). These non-consenting others are often made invisible in discourses of ethical representation and the rights of the participants; but images can make them visible, as Barthes (2003) comments, ‘I am observed without knowing it’. Furthermore, although these unconscious others may not be in the photographs themselves their association with participants’ images and the accompanying interviews means that they become knowable (Mannay 2013d). In this way visual images that have identifying characteristics, which could be linked to people and places, act to compromise not only participants but the other individuals who were not aware that their lives were discussed in research interviews, individuals who were never given the opportunity to express informed consent (Mannay 2011).

Thus, immersion in the lives of others cannot be easily forgotten, rather, ‘it engenders a sense of responsibility, to react, to act and to find a way for what has been shared to translate into something worthwhile’ (Mannay 2013d, p.134). As Mills and Ratcliffe (2012, p. 155) argue, the ethnographer should be ‘encouraged to acknowledge the complexity and unpredictability of the research encounter’; and to meet this challenge in ethically responsible ways. Respect for Persons is expressed principally through the securing of free, informed and ongoing consent of participants (TCPS 2014). However, ongoing consent is difficult to negotiate once visual images become part of the digital landscape; and for the non-consenting others made visible through association, ‘no consent’ can never be free or informed.

In response to these issues, in my own work, I have begun to consider the problematic nature of visual images and tried to find new ways to communicate messages without their accompanying pictures. Across my research studies, I have refrained from disseminating photographic images that feature identifiable participants. However, reflecting on ‘time immemorial’, the objects and artefacts of participants’ lives also confer the possibility of identification; the background of a family home, the contents of a drawer, the collection of images within a collage, the hand drawn maps that were laminated for participants to retain a lasting copy – all these items have a potential for recognition. Consequently, in more recent work, I have engaged with alternative and experimental forms of dissemination, which attempt to retain the impact of participants’ data without compromising their anonymity.

Making the Visual Invisible

In exploring other ways to represent visual data, and their accompanying elicitation interviews, I have employed poetic forms. Poems act to disrupt the structure of the academic article, puncturing the traditional flow of the text, resonating with the disruptive function of images in text and their potential for defamiliarization (Gurevitch 1998). Much like the insertion of images, poetry can force the reader to slow down, to look again and to linger as the rhythm of their reading is disrupted. Additionally, just as interpretations of images are generated through particular structures of feeling (Fink and Lomax 2014), poetry can engage readers at the level of affect and can become repositories for our emotions. However, unlike the visual image, the poem allows the researcher more control to create a representation that can maintain the anonymity of participants and the non-consenting others who could be identified through the inclusion of photographic data.

In previous publications, I have included poems to communicate the problematic nature of non-consenting others in the research process (Mannay 2011), to explore the practice and performance of motherhood within asymmetrical gendered and classed spaces (Mannay 2014b), and to present accounts of domestic and familial abuse (Mannay 2013d). The latter two poems were drawn from participants’ accounts around their narrative and visual productions and were written to convey the understandings and emotions communicated. These poems were constructed long after the interviews; this was not a collaborative activity, rather the poems were constructed from these accounts, drawing on and reworking verbatim quotes. In this way, the poems acted to disseminate participants’ stories, as part of a decolonizing methodology (Smith 1999), in an ethical form that retained their anonymity and made their visual images invisible, whilst also retaining the affective power of the accounts; moving beyond the dense, dry, flat prose that form a linguistic armour in much academic writing (Lerum 2001).

It is important then to keep thinking about ethical, impactful dissemination that can communicate the depth of identifying visual and narrative productions when these are at risk of being silenced by their absence. Poetry is one option but the dialogic epistolary form is also worth consideration. For example, Carroll (2015) employed the epistolary genre to communicate her findings from an ethnographic research project on human milk donation and the use of donated breastmilk for hospitalised, preterm infants, which included video recordings. As the nature of the research meant that the film footage could not be disseminated, Carroll created a series of letters from a donating mother and the recipient mother. Like my poetic forms, the letters themselves were constructed by Carroll, and act as a representation of the intimate thoughts, affective sentiments, and labours that surround the provision and use of donor milk, that were generated in the
ethnographic fieldwork.

Carroll (2015) is able to engage the reader and communicate the important subtle, affective moments that were not only conveyed to her, but also experienced by her during ethnographic fieldwork. The careful crafting of these letters provides a platform to communicate the experiences of the mothers in the study in a way that retains their anonymity but also highlights the emotional impact of connection, disconnection and silence that is engendered by the formal milk banking sector’s anonymous system of donation. In this way, Carroll’s sensitive and powerful examples of representational correspondence, the dialogic epistolary form, letter writing with its familiar conventions of dates, salutations, closings, and signatures, proved a useful resource for disseminating the findings of visual data without the inclusion of identifying images.

An alternative form of creative dissemination, which has attempted to create spaces of ‘seeing’ without risking anonymity is theatre. For example, Richardson’s (2015) conceptualisation of ‘theatre as a safe space’ and his play Under Us All, drew on the verbatim accounts of participants’ visual elicitation interviews and conversations in his ethnographic fieldwork. The play, performed by actors, acted to communicate participants’ narratives, retaining the power of these accounts but removing the associated images and wider contextualization to maintain confidentiality. Richardson’s approach, like the other examples discussed here, attempted to negotiate the tension between concealing identity and giving participants a voice while engaging audiences at an affective level and achieving impact.

Conclusion

In the mediated world of contemporary academia, social scientists are invited to reinvent their methodological approaches, defying restrictive views on disciplinary boundaries and engaging with the ‘latest and greatest’ techniques. As Margolis and Pauwels (2011, p.xxii) contend ‘the future of visual research will depend on the continued effort to cross disciplinary boundaries and engage in a constructive dialogue with different schools of thought’. However, as researchers it is important to locate ourselves within longstanding research traditions so that we can benefit from this experience rather than re-learning old lessons.

In relation to working with modes of visual data, it is important not be ‘seduced by the truthfulness of the appearance of things’ (Brown 2009, p.14) but to question the image in relation to its cultural and temporal context; and where possible to engage in elicitation processes that allow the meaning making of the creator to be centralised (Rose 2010). In this way, rather than simply allowing the image to speak (Banks 2001), researchers can embed themselves in a research tradition that allows the cultivation of a more nuanced understanding of participants’ lives, which includes and goes beyond the visual image.

The paper has demonstrated how working creatively also contributes to a slow science, which enables flexibility and serendipity in the field (Rivoal and Salazar 2013), eliciting processes of free association, encouraging reflexivity and connecting with participants at the level of affect, which is both a strength and an ethical challenge in visual studies. The slow science of visual research can also engender unsettling stories and facilitate a level of emotional access to participants’ social worlds, which the researcher is not always adequately prepared to encounter (Mannay and Morgan 2015). Importantly, in relation to harm and distress, in both modes of data production and dissemination, ‘ideas of responsible knowing’ (Gabb 2010, p. 461) must continually be centralised both for research participants and the non-consenting others that can be made visible without their knowledge.

Reflecting on my ethnographic journeys, in and beyond the field, visual engagement, can be advantageous yet also complex and challenging; as Brannan et al (2012, p.7) argue, critique is ‘key to progressing the aims and promoting the merits of any research tradition’. Therefore, the lesson that I have learnt is to embrace that learning is an ongoing process, no method is a panacea and we will not always foresee the unintended consequences of our fieldwork. However, by accepting this we can refine our craft and move beyond the ‘indignity of speaking for others’ (Spencer 2011, p.15) to working and speaking with our participants. For these reasons, visual researchers themselves need to remain ardent critics of visual work to be aware of the possible difficulties and to continue to explore landscapes of representation, interpretation, voice, trust, confidentiality, silence; this is in addition to the intended and unintended consequences of research with images and their dissemination, which creates the opportunity for misrecognition, reinterpretation and reinvention.

Visual methods can be employed creatively, in relation to data production, analysis and dissemination. Yet, they also need to be applied reflexively and ethically. Visual researchers need to consider when to disseminate images and when to ensure their invisibility in the audiencing of their work. In making these decisions it is important to reflect on the accounts and impacts of previous academic studies and also to look forward and beyond, appreciating time immemorial and the problematic nature of consent that cannot be renegotiated or taken back once images enter the visual economy. Visual images can act as a powerful tool in the dissemination of research. However, they can also compromise participants and, importantly, the non-consenting others that form a part of participants’ visual data and narrative descriptions. Therefore, it may be safer to publish this work without the accompanying images and instead work to craft academic writing so that it can maintain impact through the use of poetry, theatre, epistolary forms or other creative genres. For Barthes (2003), ‘photography transformed subject into object’ but it is essential to remember that participants are not objects but individuals with lives and families beyond the fixed trope of the image, which should be respected in projects of dissemination.

Notes:
1. The place name Hystryd is fictitious and was chosen to maintain anonymity.
2. The techniques of self-directed photography and photo-elicitation, or ‘photovoice’ as it is sometimes called, have been used successfully in a range of research studies. In this study participants were each provided with a camera and asked to take a series of photographs depicting meaningful places, spaces
and activities. The photographs then formed the basis of an interview where I engaged in a tape-recorded discussion with each participant.

3. The technique of mapping is an activity where participants are asked to draw a representation of a specific geographical space of journey. In this study, participants were each provided with art materials and asked to make a series of maps depicting meaningful places, spaces and activities. The maps then formed the basis of an interview where I engaged in a tape-recorded discussion with each participant.

4. The technique of collage is an activity where participants are asked to create a representation through images taken from existing sources such as magazines. In this study participants were asked to find images and make a series of collages depicting meaningful places, spaces and activities. The collages then formed the basis of an interview where I engaged in a tape-recorded discussion with each participant. Further discussion of this activity and the other visual techniques applied can be found in Mannay (2010).

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the participants who made this article possible, and also Professor John Fitz, Professor Emma Renold and Professor Bella Dicks for supervising my research project. I would also like to thank the reviewers for their encouragement and invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this paper; and the editorial team at Visual Methodologies for their support, particularly the guest editor Professor Marilys Guillemin. I am also grateful to the Research Methods Laboratory scientific committee, particularly Dr William Feighery, for inviting me to present at the Visual Methodologies 2013 conference, which rehearsed some of the material explored here. The doctoral research project from which this paper is drawn was titled Mothers and Daughters on the Margins: Gender, Generation and Education and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (PTA031200600088).

References


