**Sharing Images, Spoiling Meanings? Class, Gender, and Ethics in Visual Research with Girls**

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**Abstract**

In our article we consider the ethical challenges engendered by participatory visual research with girls. Drawing on photographs taken by and of girls we explore how to reconcile the challenges generated by disseminating images of girls while supporting them to have a voice in research. Our concerns are focused on how to maintain the integrity of girls' visual voices while protecting them from any harm that may result from revealing visual information about them. This issue has become increasingly germane for visual sociology since developments in digital technology and visual culture mean that images can circulate instantaneously and in perpetuity, potentially stripping them of their creators' intentions and infusing them with new and unintended meanings. We consider different approaches to resolving our ongoing ethical dilemma and examine their potential for honoring the flesh-and-blood girl's right to be heard amidst concerns about her digital visibility.

**Introduction: Picture This**

In a collection of photographs—taken by and of girls participating in a creative methods study—appears a striking image of two thirteen-year-old girls, Alicia and Megan. It is technically sophisticated in that Chloe, the girl photographer, has captured the precise instant when Alicia, in the foreground of the image and at the top of a playground slide, begins to slip towards her.[1] The summer breeze combined with Alicia's trajectory down the slide means that her blonde hair is blown upwards, reinforcing the pleasure displayed in the girl's playful

smile to camera. Behind her on the slide stands Megan, seemingly entirely at ease and focused fully on the photographer's gaze. The girls in the image are very different in appearance and so the content of the photograph also appears to encapsulate two contrasting portrayals of girlhood. Alicia embodies a stereotypically feminine girl—physically slight, with long straightened blonde hair, dressed in shorts and a low-cut, sleeveless black T-shirt, and wearing earrings and bracelets. Megan presents a more tomboyish figure with her loose-fitting jeans and sweatshirt and short hair. Their postures are correspondingly interesting with Alicia striking a photogenically sophisticated feminine pose, tilting her head onto her shoulder as she looks to the camera, and Megan impudently staring down at the photographer as if asserting her control over the making of the image. The girls are thus both agentic in creating this visual landscape of working-class girlhood and *knowing* in their engagement with the photographer, albeit unalike in terms of the gendered identities they are performing at that moment as they play, literally and metaphorically, to the camera.

What we have described is a rich, complex, and aesthetically attractive photograph of girlhood, which momentarily captures some of the multiple ways of being a girl in twenty-first century Britain while celebrating the importance of play and social relationships in girls' everyday experiences. It was generated in a study in which girls were actively involved in the choice of methods and focus of their creative outputs, and for which we had consent from parents and support from local community gatekeepers. Equally importantly, it was also the favorite image of the girls who participated in the study and who selected it for inclusion in a research methods workshop and an exhibition of their creative outputs at an international visual methods conference. For this reason, and because it represents many of the pleasures and insights we had while working with these girls, we are similarly attached to it.

Why, then, do we experience such anxiety about the ethics of letting go of this photograph and including it in publications about the study? Our primary concern is that since

the research was carried out and the participants' lives have moved on, unforeseeable changes in the use of social media by young people have occurred while visual portrayals of girls' classed and gendered identities have become the focus of increased anxiety and prurient disapproval. This new context calls into question the extent to which the girls' and their parents' consent for their photographs from the study to be included in our research findings can still be considered informed. How could Alicia, Megan, and Chloe have understood, when creating this photograph, the ways in which it might become appropriated by different visual cultures, both now and in the future? In this we are concerned with the pressing problem of "time immemorial" (Brady and Brown 2013: 102) for visual sociology and, more particularly, the difficulties of anticipating how, if published, the girls' photograph might outlive and spoil the meanings of girlhood they sought to portray. These are the issues that provoke our discussion here and inform the ways in which we continue to grapple with the broader ethical challenges of visual research in studies of girlhood.

**Portraits of Girlhood: Research Contexts, Structures of Feeling, and Socio-cultural Landscapes**

The image considered in this article originates from a creative participatory research study, undertaken during 2010 and 2011 and located in a disadvantaged housing estate in the south of England. The study's aims were to explore the experiences of adults, young people, and children who were resident in this stigmatized neighborhood and examine their feelings of belonging and attachment to the local community (Fink 2012; Lomax et al. 2011). As visual sociologists, we sought to situate our approach to interrogating ideas and representations of community within broader sociological, geographical, and policy conceptualizations of place and community relationships and the social processes of social inclusion and exclusion (see Byrne et al. (2016), Brent (2009), and Rogaly and Taylor (2011), for example). As part of this study, a series of participatory projects was undertaken specifically with children and young

people (seven girls and seven boys, aged between eight and fourteen), using methods and media of their choosing (participatory video, digital photography, drawing) that enabled them to voice their perspectives on what constitutes a good place to live and what threatens this. In these projects we sought to place the participants at the heart of the decision-making while recognizing and being transparent about the challenges such strategies present (Lomax et al. 2011). We thus align ourselves with other critical researchers committed to reflexively interrogating their research practices in order to advance participatory scholarship (Brady and Brown 2013; Haaken and O'Neill 2014; Hunleth 2011; Luttrell 2010; Mannay 2010; 2013). What we did not fully anticipate, however, were the challenges we would have to navigate between our participatory research aims and the resulting ethical dilemmas of making a classed and gendered voice visible, as it were, in later research outputs.

Our discussion explores our unease at including this particular photograph in accounts of the research study. On the one hand, we would argue that visual data offers opportunities to better understand and portray the complexity of girlhood and girls' identities in contemporary Britain (Epstein et al. 2012). But, on the other, we are aware that our anxieties about literally making visible the girls who participated in this study are made all the more palpable by what Williams (1977) would identify as the period's structure of feeling wherein girlhood is repeatedly constructed and portrayed as a dangerous time and space, and portrayals of working-class young people are saturated with stigmatizing discourses of poverty, inadequacy and irresponsibility.

This structure of feeling emanates from visual and media cultures that are simultaneously steeped in sexualized images of girls and young women and beset by moral panics about the effects of these images that include the premature sexualization of girls (Kehily 2012; Renold and Ringrose 2011), the commodified eroticization of the girl-child (Holland 2004) and the occlusion of girls' vulnerability and sexual precarity (Marshall and

Gilmore 2015). While the relationship between such cultures and lived experience remains contested, Gill has cogently argued that we must not lose sight either of "the way in which a cultural habit of images may discipline, regulate and shape subjectivities" or "the resistances … that may be possible" (2008: 434). This, then, is the first strand in our ethical dilemma about disseminating this photograph in print and in on-line publications and, by so doing, exposing it to use beyond the academy. It drives our concern about audiences' willingness to keep in view the subtle complexities of the images' particular meanings of girlhood—for these girls, in this time and space—when they are habituated to seeing the objectification and sexualization of girls in visual and media cultures. It also raises the conundrum of whether it is possible to pay witness to differently inflected ways of being a girl in the context of twenty-first century Britain's "toxic" (Renold and Ringrose 2011: 392) sexual culture since this is a challenge we cannot meet without releasing the girls' photographs into the very spaces that pose the risks from which we seek to shield them.

The period's structure of feeling also reveals widespread political and social concerns about the need to protect and support the emotional and physical wellbeing of children and young people, especially those who are understood to be vulnerable or socially disadvantaged (Department of Health 2015; Marmot 2010). At the same time, there is a marked hardening of attitudes towards poorer people in both policy and wider social discourses (Park et al. 2012), despite growing evidence of the impact of the so-called austerity welfare cuts on the lives of the most vulnerable people in Britain (O'Hara 2014). These cuts are, for example, predicted to increase rates of child poverty (Brown and Hood 2016) and heighten experiences of social exclusion amongst children and young people of poorer families in receipt of benefits. Nevertheless there is a widespread belief that welfare recipients are "scroungers" (ComRes 2012: n.p.) or "skivers" (Valentine and Harris 2014: 87) and a disregard for the structural causes of poverty such as joblessness, low-paid employment, and insecure housing. This

social imaginary about poorer people is reinforced by the number of what are known as poverty porn documentaries and reality shows that are broadcast on British TV,[2] in which supposed experts adjudicate on what they deem to be the dysfunctional nature of working-class lifestyles and behavior (Jensen 2014; Mooney 2011).

There is, in addition, another layer to this stigmatizing social imaginary in which families in disadvantaged neighborhoods are held to be personally responsible for their poverty. This is the rise of what Tyler has identified as a new vocabulary of social class in which "chav" has become "a ubiquitous term of abuse for white working class subjects" (2008:17). The phenomenon of the chav has generated an outpouring of class prejudice and disgust (Jones 2011) that is predominantly defined through body culture, fashion, and style in which working-class girls and young women, in particular, are marked as "inferior within the hierarchies of taste and class distinction" (Back 2007: 89). Here lies the second strand in our ethical dilemma; it is focused on the implications of publishing photographs taken of and by working-class girls when the punitive vocabularies of class in contemporary culture could be used by viewers as interpretive lenses through which to read the girls' images. Despite our interpretations of the images as offering complex understandings of girlhood in working-class neighborhoods, we remain deeply anxious that the girls might become the subject of class prejudice if their photographs were lifted out of their research contexts and the girls' creative intentions became lost as a result. It is these wider gendered and classed contexts that frame our discussion of this photograph of Alicia and Megan. Our concern is how to reconcile our obligations to the girls' research voices with the possibility that they might, through the publication of their photograph, be subject to negative scrutiny and judgment.

**Interpreting Images: Multiple Meanings and Possible Identities**

The photograph of Alicia and Megan is one of a set of ten images taken by the young people and selected by them for inclusion in an international exhibition, and in local ones arising

from the research. In keeping with the project's participatory aims, the girls attended these local exhibitions and presented their research to invited members of the public and local councilors. Offering young people a platform to speak about their experiences ensured that they were able to voice their unique interpretations of the images to audiences who viewed them in real time. We would not claim the young people to have had epistemic privilege (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008) which overrides all other interpretations, nor that there were not social dynamics of class, gender, and age that shaped how audiences responded to the young people and the images. Indeed, it was these very responses that first alerted us to the ethical challenges engendered by dissemination. However, we consider that including the "flesh and blood person in the evocative presentation of her [and his] life" (Foster 2007: 364) afforded audiences the opportunity of engaging with the young people as complex and agentic individuals. In this way, they were presented with multiple stories and possible meanings that are not readily available in isolated and context-less viewings of digital photographs wherein the meanings of images may evade viewers or lead to the objectification of young people.

The third strand of our ethical dilemma is exemplified by our reading of this photograph, one that is informed by our determination to uphold the girls' agency, both as photographer and photographic subjects. Chloe, who took the photograph, was understandably proud of her image in its capturing of the girls' friendship. The girls' facial expressions convey their emotional attachment to each other and to Chloe herself at this particular moment. The photograph's technical sophistication—the ways in which the girls are positioned so that they dominate the frame, their physical closeness, and the alignment of their gaze directly at the camera from their elevated positions—compels our attention. Moreover, by situating the image in a playground setting and, at the same time, playing to and with the camera, Megan and Alicia reinforce the playful identities and dynamics of girlhood that infuse the photograph.

The girls' playfulness in this image is illustrative of their liveliness throughout the research process (Lomax 2012). The images and video-footage are testament to this way of being but also to the participatory research methodology that offered them the freedom to engage with the media as they chose. The girls' control over this process and the creative opportunities it presented suggest that their images might be better understood as "investigatory landscape (s) … where identities are played with and performed … rather than fixed versions of reality" (Poser 2006: 3). Megan and Alicia's decision to pose for this photograph at this moment and its alignment with textbook lighting and productive contexts (the ray of sunshine that illuminates Alicia's face and the breeze that lifts her hair) are both factors that contribute to its attractiveness generally, and its appeal to them in particular.

We would not claim, however, that our interpretation is correct but we do suggest that it is informed by the close relationships we forged with the girls and the attention and commitment we afforded to all stages of the participatory research process. Nevertheless, we are conscious that generating knowledge about an image in this way is a profoundly political act (Munford et al. 2008) and that it can reinforce power hierarchies in research relationships. We have sought, therefore, to examine our reading of the photograph reflexively, building on techniques developed in other visual research (Fink and Lomax 2014; Lomax and Fink 2010) and being attentive to the ethics of representing the girls in ways that not only acknowledge our responsibilities towards them but also respect their agency and individuality.

**Through a Gendered Lens: Fixing Images of Girls**

The idea that the image of Megan and Alicia might also be troubling for some viewers became apparent at a research methods workshop during which one participant remarked that she saw the image as "provocative." Her reading illustrated how a sexualized gaze can dominate interpretations of photographs. Megan, with her tomboyish and assertive stance, is disregarded, and her girlhood identity and its seeming rejection of gendered norms are of little

interest to the workshop's participants. Rather, it is Alicia who becomes their focus. Her physical appearance and posture appear to evoke the audience's anxieties, articulated by Ringrose et al. (2013) about the proliferation of teenage girls posting provocative images of themselves on social media platforms such as Instagram and tumblr, and on apps such as Snapchat and WhatsApp.

As Murray (2015) comments, images of women and girls are pored over and troubled by commentators who suggest, on the one hand, that they reinforce oppressive, consumerist and normative discourses of  supposedly docile female bodies and, on the other, that they represent an opportunity for female empowerment, self-expression and emancipation (Tiidenberg and Cruz 2015). The ubiquity of this media and commentary perpetuates long-standing anxieties about the perceived risks faced by girls in that liminal stage between childhood and adulthood (Fink and Tinkler 2016) while providing new ways of fixing and classifying girls' and women's bodies as too present, too agentic or too passive and too visible. Such "ways of seeing," to call on the title of Berger's 1972 classic text, become problematic when they are applied to this image, undermining the girls' creativity and voice as well as our determination to support them in this agency. They establish a lens through which to see Megan and Alicia, which, we would argue, may negate how the girls see themselves and would like to be seen, and how we have sought to translate this in our interpretation of the image. As Thomson (2008) suggests, this has to do with the mimetic properties of images whereby the seeming familiarity of images alongside their capacity to elicit instantaneous emotional responses in viewers is problematic for seeing, as it were, young people's voices.

Allen (2015) captures similar difficulties in her critical analysis of the barriers she encountered in disseminating creative outputs from participatory visual research exploring young people's school-based learning about sexuality. Her dilemma also centers on the

publication of images by and of young people deemed to be of a sexual nature.  As she
argues:

> Whilst texts are associated with reason and higher mental faculties, images are seen as
> subversive, dangerous and visceral … a double standard ensues whereby visual
> images are considered more personal, and more threatening, than written text
> conveying individuals' thoughts and feelings (297).

Allen's unease reflects our own worries about making this photograph of Alicia and Megan
available in print and digital media. The endurance of images, with their potential to preserve
these girls in this momentary pose, for "time immemorial" (Brady and Brown 2013: 102)
means that we have a responsibility to consider how this image may be read and how such
readings may collide with the here and now and future girl. This includes acknowledging that
Alicia and Megan, although enthusiastic about the image at the time it was taken, may come
to reflect unhappily on the ways in which they represented themselves visually and the
enduring legacy of this for them as adult women. Of concern here also are the ways this may
be exacerbated by the language used to describe the image.

The problematic nature of expressions such as feminine pose and playful smile
became only too apparent as we attempted to unravel the multiple possible readings, the
articulation of which required us to draw on words which, when applied to girls' bodies, have
an inherent sensuality. Our discussions call to mind Thomson's warning about the ways in
which language can "trick" (2008:11) but, more particularly, about how the juxtaposition of
image and printed word becomes a prism through which to make sense of the image (Fink and
Lomax 2014; Trachtenberg 1989) and through which the girls' intentions may be distorted.
The combination of the visceral authority of images (Allen 2015) and the power of language
to filter and fix meanings frames the fourth and final strand of our ethical dilemma.

**Visual Ethics and Ethical Dilemmas**

As well as our responsibilities to these girls in this study, we have, as visual sociologists, a broader ethical obligation to consider how the outputs of our research may become part of the wider visual culture. This includes how images, taken out of context, may contribute to, and become part of, a negative culture for women and girls (Murray 2015) and the normative cultural lexicon for women (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1997). Addressing how research images might be put to use beyond the academy is a concern articulated in the suggestion of Wiles et al. that all researchers "have to carefully consider the implications of using the data they have collected … [including] how the research, and indeed the images, may be used in the future" (2008: 22). However, as we now outline, there is a lack of consensus in the visual methods literature about the best way of doing this.

Wiles et al. (2008) propose that researchers have a responsibility to protect the young people who participate in research from harm but how to do this within a participatory framework is increasingly contested (Dingwall 2008; Tilley and Woodthorpe 2011). One key element in this debate is outlined by Nutbrown (2010), who notes the challenges that can arise between restrictive, protectionist ethical governance and the imperative to listen to and respect children's voices (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 12 and 13). This can generate tensions between young peoples' wishes to be visible and the ethical principles of anonymity that prevail in much research ethics guidance (Lomax 2015; Wiles et al. 2010). A survey of visual researchers by Wiles et al. (2010) suggests that researchers within this evolving research climate are conflicted about how to manage these competing demands. For some, complete anonymity is the only possible approach. This includes pixilating images of research participants in research outputs. However, as Banks (2001) and Wiles et al. (2008) note, this has the undesirable consequence of criminalizing and objectifying participants, while Nutbrown (2010) argues that it renders already vulnerable and unrepresented young people voiceless. Furthermore, young people who participate in creative and visual research

projects have repeatedly voiced their dislike of, and disappointment at, seeing their images ravaged by the anonymization process (Bagnoli 2008). Moreover, blurring and pixilating images destroys the aesthetic of young peoples' images thus obscuring their intentions and creativity (Allen 2015; Prosser and Loxley 2008) and, as Sweetman suggests, sets up " a particular relationship (perhaps of culpability, concern or suspicion)" (2009: 6) between the audience and the observed. Most recently, Allen explores how anonymization "corrode(s) foundations of participant agency" (2015: 305). In anonymized photographs taken by and of young people, she argues that there is a loss of two sets of voices, the first of the young person taking the photograph, who wanted to configure the picture in a particular way, and the second of the young person actually depicted in the photograph.

A second approach is to abandon anonymity in favor of presenting so-called authentic visual data, which represents participants' voices and interests (Sweetman 2009), an argument that is predicated on participants' rights to have their contributions recognized and researchers' moral responsibility to address historic imbalances of power between researchers and the researched (Moore 2012). Yet, as we have maintained, this is by no means straightforward. Images may be misunderstood or misread and, once in the public domain, potentially used to misrepresent research participants and their intentions.

The ever-evolving ethical concerns we identify here are elaborated by Mok et al. in their discussion of the research ethics engendered by the rapid development of digital technologies and their application in social research. Their review of the visual ethics literature prompted them to warn of the increasing "power, breadth and multi-functional integration" (2015: 309) of these technologies, including their capacity to assemble unique information and metadata about individuals in ways that visual researchers have been slow to acknowledge. Furthermore, they suggest that the temptation for researchers to see participants as already divulging information about themselves through their online digital activity does

not lessen ethical obligations to them. As our analysis has considered, there may be similarities between the girls' photograph and images that young people might post of themselves online. However, unlike the social media selfie, which can be deleted by its creator (notwithstanding that records may still remain), our research participants are not in a position to delete research images once they have been published. If they, in time, change their minds or tire of this form of representation, their images will, despite their wishes, remain in the public domain.

**An Ethic of Care and Representational Ethics: A Way Forward?**

There has, therefore, been something of an impasse in visual research ethics. There is no consensus on how or if the ethical dilemma that forms the focus of our discussion in this article might be resolved. We would suggest, however, that drawing on an ethic of care and on a model of representational ethics can usefully bring the particularities of this ethical dilemma into view and sharpen understanding of what must be confronted and acknowledged. For us, the combined principles of these two ethical standpoints provide a productive way of thinking through what is at stake in supporting girls' having a voice in research and making that voice available to others in and beyond the research academy.

An ethic of care (Tronto 1993) was a key feature of our research design; built around the principles of caring for and about each other, this approach framed the relationships we established with the girls and reflected the moral framework established by the young people themselves in their approach to the research (Lomax 2012). By foregrounding care in the interrogation of our ethical dilemma, it is possible, long after leaving the field, to prioritize these relationships through a "disposition … of deep care" (Nutbrown 2010: 11) which guides how we return to, engage with, and interpret the girls' photographs. The significance of the relationships for us is also crucial to understanding the extent to which "ethical dilemmas are emotionally grounded, visceral experiences" (Freeman and Preissle 2010: 464) and how we

continue to invest significant emotional labor in managing the different anxieties generated by this experience. As Rossman and Rallis argue, an ethic of care emphasizes the moral interdependence of researchers and research participants and thus shifts discussions of ethical decision-making away from a "focus on the individual as moral agent or on mere procedures that attempt to police … relationships" (2010: 384). In short, the first particular in this dilemma is concerned with maintaining "caring interactions" (Noddings 1995: 187) with the girls and an ethic of care demonstrates how such interactions would be fundamentally undermined if, by our publishing their photograph, the girls became the subject of disparaging or judgmental comments.

Alongside the significance of care in participatory visual research with girls, representational ethics highlights the equally important issue of research contexts. As Currier outlines, the principles of representational ethics "govern how qualitative researchers portray research participants and the social, cultural, and political contexts research participants inhabit" (2011: 464).  We have argued extensively that our ethical decision-making around publishing the image of Alicia and Megan cannot be separated from the research context in which the photograph was generated and the wider visual and media cultures which shape how girlhood is performed, portrayed, understood, and regulated. While the importance of visibility runs through representational ethics because representation can "give voice to marginalized social groups" (465), the potential for harm as a result of that visibility is also clearly acknowledged. The possibly damaging intersection of context and visibility is, then, the second particular in our ethical dilemma that has been usefully highlighted by representational ethics. The most important tool to avoid harm and exploitation is to identify the structural contexts in which our research is located and to ask "how we enact, resist or scope [them] when we write" (Irwin 2006: 170). This foregrounds powerfully how the girls'

vulnerability, as poorer working-class girls on the cusp of womanhood, could be exacerbated by making them visible in publications.

Having established the importance of maintaining caring interactions with the girls and avoiding any potential harm that greater visibility in visual and media cultures might have upon their present and future lives, we know, with certainty, that we will not be including this image in print or in on-line publications. As importantly, our critical and reflexive exploration has established the rationale for our decision and, we hope, opened up new opportunities for grappling with other ethical dilemmas in visual studies of girlhood.

**Bios**

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**Acknowledgements**

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**Notes**

[1] All the girls have been given pseudonyms.

[2] See TV programmes such as *Jeremy Kyle*, *Benefits Britain*, and *Skint*.