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7 Family Photographs as a Topic for Conversation

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Abstract

This paper outlines one aspect of a study that focused on generating and analysing discursive data in order to explore older women's constructions of their relationships: the use of personal photographs as a stimulus for 'purposeful' conversation. Photographs have been implemented in many ways throughout the social sciences and the approach discussed here was particularly influenced by work that began in the 1970s and 1980s with studies using photo elicitation (Collier and Collier, 1986) and those using what has become termed 'the home mode' (Musello, 1979). The resulting interactional data were then transcribed and analysed using the ethnomethodological approaches of conversation analysis and membership categorisation analysis. Asking women to talk about their personal photographs revealed a range of relational features. In particular they stimulated remembered, storied accounts of events and experiences relating to their relationships.

Visual Images and Social Science

Personal objects – and particularly photographs – have been used successfully in various types of social scientific research. Looking at people's experience of a stay in hospital, Radley and Taylor (2003) asked patients to photograph important aspects of their ward and then discussed the significance of the photographs with them. Another approach was to examine Spanish bullfighting through a series of photograph (Pink, 2001). These studies demonstrate the two strands through which photographs have been used in the social sciences: the first implements photographs as a topic through which experiences or events can be shared and examined; the second uses photographs as a resource through which an interesting phenomena can be explored.

With the exception of anthropologists (eg. Bateson and Mead, 1942; Collier and Collier, 1986), social science writers have been criticised for tending to focus attention on language rather than image (Wagner, 1979; Harrison, 2002b). Life stories, for example, are organised around various forms of writing rather than visual images (Harper, 1994). Writers draw attention to the problematic or complex nature of visual imagery for social science, widely

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criticising it as under-developed (eg. Pink, 2001; Wagner, 1979; Musello, 1979; Cronin, 1998; Prosser, 1998). Despite these uncertainties, social scientists have incorporated the use of photographs in a wide variety of ways (Musello, 1979; eg. Chalfen, 1987) and the use of photographs has continued to develop (eg. Plummer, 2001; Harrison, 2002a; Malson et al., 2002). Whichever approach is taken, photographs are agreed to be a publicly available medium that can generate discussion and create a sense of community (Horrocks et al., 2002).

A recent distinction in the body of work using photographs is discussed by Rose (2003). Whereas the general focus of photographic studies has been on the content of photographs, cultural understandings of them, or their meaning for the people taking them (Corbus Bezner, 2002; Pink, 2001), Rose instead examines their use in the home. She looks at which photographs are put on display, how these displays are organised and how decisions are made about which photographs come to be circulated amongst family members. These mundane uses of photographs and the functions they perform in everyday life is something that motivated my own study with my interest focused not on what photographs meant for people or who had taken them, but rather in what the photographs 'did' – how they made relationships relevant and how the talk around them was constructed.

Making Use of Family Photographs

Two methods of using photographs for social research purposes were relevant to the design of this research: photo-elicitation – the practice of using photographs as interview stimuli (eg. Collier and Collier, 1986; Wagner, 1979) and the 'home mode' (Musello, 1979; Chalfen, 1987) – the study of collections of family photographs.

Generally in studies using photo elicitation photographs taken for a specific purpose are presented in conjunction with a semi-structured interview so that "the chosen images will have some significance for interviewees" (Prosser and Schwartz, 1998:124). In this way the subjective meanings that are attached to the photographs can be explored (eg. Heron and Williams, 1996). Family rituals and history have been investigated using this method (Munro and Madigan, 1999) and since the publication of Wagner's (1979) collection it has been applied in a wide variety of investigations (Horrocks et al., 2002; Prosser, 1998; Harrison, 2002a). There are several advantages to this approach. First, photographs can be introduced as a topic for talk either to supplement or replace questions in the research process. Second, as Robinson (2002) suggests, photo-assisted interviews may reduce the power differential present in interviews. Third, as a result of talking around photographs rather than being

asked to respond to questions, the participant may introduce accounts not anticipated by the researcher in designing the question schedule.

Christopher Musello (1979) coined the term the 'home mode' to refer to the collections of family photographs that have received a limited (though continuous) amount of attention in social science (Spence and Holland, 1991; Rose, 1996, 2003; Chalfen, 1987; Collier and Collier, 1986). As with other areas, the photographs produced and accumulated within the context of family life tend to follow a similar pattern (Rose, 2003); what is considered 'suitable' to photograph is dependent more on social conventions than on individual decisions. So, as Harrison (2002b) remarks, some occasions (such as birthdays and weddings in the family arena), are typically photographed and represented extensively whereas others (such as funerals), are not (Corbus Bezner, 2002). This tension between what photographs people consider appropriate and inappropriate is emphasised by Musello in discussing "the personal and private process" of family photography (1979: 105). He illustrates how in day-to-day life these collections of photographs are often used to facilitate social interaction. Their display and distribution, as well as their taking, forms connections between people.

Family Photographs

Musello (1979) argues that family photograph collections tend to include only a closed circle of family and friends, featuring a narrow range of settings and activities – they are selected representations portraying 'appropriate' elements of family life. As Kuhn (1996) suggests, they are about stories of a shared past carrying with them a circular process – not only does the family create the images but the images themselves create the family. So family members photograph specific occasions and people, and these images, and the discussions accompanying their showing, become the view that others are given of 'the family'.

This argument is at the heart of this study – in initiating conversations I requested no particular photographs except that they should be chosen to represent the women's personal relationships. All those that were selected portrayed family occasions such as the ones mentioned above, as well as holidays, parties and similar gatherings. The few exceptions to this were commented upon in the conversation. For example, in Extract 1 Marie draws attention to a photograph of her mother working in a field and wonders how she came to take it:

Extract 1

　　1.　Helen　　　that's your mum

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    2.   Marie   yes and Esther and Jim me and Esther
    3.   Helen   she's a bonnie baby
    4.   Marie   I mean what what what photographs did I take me mother
    5.   pulling brussel sprouts off the
    6.   Helen   yeah but they're good photographs
    7.   Marie   and that's me going
    8.   Jane   it shows what life was like as well
    9.   Helen   yes it does

In addition to the dominance of a small range of family occasions Wagner (1979) adds two more types of image that present family identity within the family photograph collection. The first is the idealised, formal, posed images that are often seen in school photographs, or those of the family taken in a photographic studio rather than by another family member. The second is those images of family members in 'alternative' situations, for example asleep or dressed in unusual ways. These are often presented as silly or funny, and provide amusement by giving another level of characterisation to the person or people portrayed. All three of these categories were represented in the photographs that were presented in this research. Extract 2 focuses on talk about an 'alternative' situation – a fancy dress party that Ellen and Audrey had both attended where Audrey and Keith were dressed as two well-known television characters, Norah Batty and Compo:

Extract 2

    1.   Audrey   there's Ellen in the middle yeah
    2.   Jane   oh let's have a look
    3.   Ellen   oh yes [I remember
    4.   Jane   [did you go together then]
    5.   Audrey   [Keith and I were no (.)] [no that was (.) Keith and=
    6.   Ellen   [well we
    7.   Audrey   =I were Norah Batty and::der::r (.) Compo
    8.   Ellen   oh God I didn't recog- [(laugh) it was it was when=
    9.   Jane   [(laugh)
  10. Ellen   =whatdyac- (.) er who lived [(.) opposite (.)] h- who lived
  11.   opposite (.) Don and Ann

Many studies of family photography point out that the family is represented in these types of photographs in particular ways – generally with no inclusion of tension or conflict (Rose, 2003; Prosser, 1998). My own research in the main supported this. Much of our conversation focused on photographs of happy family occasions such as weddings, christenings and birthdays. However, although the occasions were generally talked about as happy the relationships

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portrayed within them were not always discussed similarly. For example, in Extract 3 Kate talks about a photograph of Rebecca's father-in-law:

Extract 3

Kate	and that's Justine
Jane	oh right
Kate	happy birthd- it might've been gran's eightieth birthday I don't know(.) I think it's granny oh and she says that's granddad o::oh::h an awkward old thing oh and that's Rebecca
Jane	and he's a hundred now is he
Kate	yes he is he's horrible to Rebecca oh
Jane	(laugh) cantankerous (laugh)
Kate	yeah very

Musello (1979) observes that one of the most important documentary purposes of the family photograph collection is to aid the retention of memories. Photographs can generate recall of specific information or they can become a prompt for reflecting on or sentimentalising the past. Therefore they tend to be used as 'keys' to memory rather than for their specific content. They are, however, only imbued with this type of 'evidentiary' value for those with direct personal knowledge of the people and events they portray. This inside information means that they may evoke memories of things that have nothing to do with the picture itself but require 'filling-in' information – they are dependent on the interpretations of those people familiar with them. Thus talk becomes indexical to the presentation of the photographs (Garfinkel, 1967).

Introducing 'Others' Into Talk About a Photograph

In my own research I found that the talk moved in many directions in relation to the photographs and conversational remembering was prompted in three specific ways. First, the people and relationships portrayed in the photograph were the focus of specific parts of the conversations. Second, some of the photographs prompted remembering about people connected to those people present in the photograph even though those discussed were not pictured. Third, on some occasions the photographs prompted conversation that seemed only loosely connected to their presentation. In these instances, however, closer examination of the conversation was hearably linked to the photographs in intricate ways. These links can be seen in the detailed examination of the remaining extract, taken from a conversation between Kate, Rebecca and Jane.
Extract 4

1.	Kate	oh that's her oh yes

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2.	Jane	so you've got people in common that that you know from=
3.	Kate	=well no th- this lady lives at South Lineham and and my
4.		husband's brother the one's that used to live in Spain well
5.		he actually died in June he got cancer and this Hilda
6.		person=
7.	Jane	=mmmm=
8.	Kate	=l-lives near him [doesn't she=
9.	Jane	[oh right
10.	Rebecca	=yes yes
11.	Kate	tha-that's all an-and er th-they (.) I I don't know how we
12.		found out but we did
13.	Jane	mm it is funny how everybody knows [somebody that=
14.	Kate	[yes
15.	Jane	=[somebody else knows [(laugh)
16.	Rebecca	[yes
17.	Kate	[Bill Brown was at our house the
18.		other day [and he was talking about when he was a young=
19.	Jane	[yeah
20.	Kate	=man and you will not remember this but years ago (.)
21.		erm (1) I call him Tom but Bill calls him Ted

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39.	Kate	and I said 'what did you say they called him' so he said
40.		'oh:::h they called him Ted Campbell'=
41.	Jane	=yeah=
42.	Kate	=er and I said
43.		'oh:::h' I said 'he married Auntie Win' (.) now the [(.) the=
44.	Rebecca	[(laugh)
45.	Kate	=man that I showed you there that came to live next door to
46.		me when I was four (.) well Auntie Win (.) was his sister
47.		[and when she was very young she had a boy with Tom=
48.	Jane	[oh
49.	Rebecca	[ah:::h

A photograph presented by Rebecca initially prompted this section of talk (referred to in Line 1 by Kate). However, Kate links Rebecca's photograph back to one that she herself had previously shown (Line 45). The relevance of Kate and Bill's conversation (Lines 17-20) to the present conversational context (ie. centred on photographs) is tenuous at first glance. However, a detailed exploration shows that Kate's account is relevant to the current conversational task of talk about relationships on several levels. First, prior to this extract Kate has introduced Bill as someone also known to Rebecca and Jane and so his relational link to the conversation is clearly established. Second, it is an account of talk about a particular relationship – that of Tom/Ted Campbell (Lines 21 and 40) and Auntie Win (Lines 43 and 46). Kate

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links their introduction into the conversation to the overall topic of the research – relationships. Third, Auntie Win is connected both to Bill and to Kate herself by the relationships Kate explicates in Line 39 onwards – she was the sister of the man who lived next door to Kate when she was a child and Bill knew her husband Tom/Ted Campbell. Fourth, Kate indexes her account of 'Auntie Win' to a previously viewed photograph of a man who lived next door – she was his sister (Lines 45-46). Therefore, she relates her account both to the *topic of conversation* and to Jane's instruction for the women to *talk about their photographs*. Kate's explicit introduction of different characters into the conversation, alongside her implicit orientation to the task, clearly illustrates the complex nature of even this brief instance of talk.

Discussion

Photographs continue to be a popular object in social scientific research and can be used either as a resource through which different areas of social life can be explored visually, or as a topic through which a range of discussions can be stimulated. In this short paper I have outlined a method that fits into this second range of research using photographs, based on ideas put forward about the home mode and photo-elicitation techniques. Through adapting these ideas I generated conversational data focused on family photographs, within which a range of personal relationships were talked about. These relationships were sometimes pictured in the photographs themselves and at others were recalled when looking at the photographs. Alternatively, as in Extract 4, they were relationships that were, in some way, prompted by the presentation of photographs and featured a wide range of people and relationships.

Transcription Notation

The transcription conventions I use throughout the extracts included here are a simplified version of those developed by Gail Jefferson (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984) as follows:

(.)	A full stop in brackets denotes a pause less than one second
(1)	A number in brackets denotes a pause timed to the nearest second
( )	A space in brackets denotes an indistinct stretch of talk
o:::old	A word containing a series of colons denotes a lengthened sound
[think they	Square brackets at the beginning of two stretches of talk denotes
[no I don't	overlapping speech (also marked at the end if one speaker continues to speak after the other has stopped)
th-	A hyphen immediately following a letter denotes a sound that is cut off

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today=	An equals sign at the end of one utterance and the beginning of the
=I'm not	next denotes no discernible gap between speech
(laugh)	A word in brackets denotes a non-speech sound
'and I said'	Speech marks around a stretch of talk denote constructed dialogue

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