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Seen and heard? Ethics and agency in participatory visual research with children, young people and families *Families, Relationships and Societies* 4 (3): 493-502

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Abstract

This article examines the ethical responsibilities engendered by participatory visual research with children and young people, focusing on the challenges that can emerge in the production and dissemination of research seeking to visually portray their experiences. The article considers the possibilities of a feminist ethics of care for working co-productively with participants in order to resolve conflicts between individual and collective voices, researchers' agendas and the ways in which images may be understood by audiences.

Key words feminist ethics • children • participatory visual methods

Introduction

The last decade or so has seen rapid developments in the use of participatory visual methods with children and young people and an increasing array of techniques for doing so. Methods include digital storytelling, mobile interviews, film-making, drawing and photography. Such methods, it is argued, enable researchers to work alongside participants, supporting people who might not otherwise participate in research and offering rich understandings of the lives of those who may not otherwise engage with traditional social science methods (Cahill, 2007; Catalani and Minkler, 2010; Haaken and O'Neill, 2014).

However, alongside these technologies and the possibilities they represent for social research have arisen challenges. These include the ways in which the visual, by its very

nature, may make participants visible in the films, photographs and visual material produced, rendering traditional ethical mores of anonymity and confidentiality almost impossible to guarantee (Sweetman, 2009). This has, it is claimed, led to an impasse or 'crossroads' in visual research whereby researchers are increasingly troubled by their ethical and moral obligations as visual researchers (Wiles et al, 2011). Of particular concern is the tension between the ethical requirement to protect respondents from being identified and the political and epistemological aims of participatory approaches predicated on giving 'voice' (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). These concerns are elaborated by Gabb (2010) in her mixed-methods research with families, in which she suggests that the potential for such methods to harm has been overblown, while Dingwall (2008: 3) argues that, at worse, these methods may cause 'minor and reversible emotional distress or some measure of reputational damage'.

Gabb's and Dingwall's comments foreshadow advances in digital and social media, which mean that images can now be disseminated to vast audiences instantaneously and for 'time immemorial', generating new ethical challenges for visual researchers (Brady and Brown, 2013: 102). These concern the harm that may emerge from excessively, and repeatedly, revealing information about participants, which they themselves may not have fully considered (Iphofen, 2011: 444). As Van Dijck (2008: 72) explains, the internet 'turns ... pictures into public property ... diminish[ing] one's power over their presentational context'. As Back (2009: 479-80) reminds us, 'the photographic image does not communicate simply or speak for itself.... In order for the photograph to be read it needs to be both contextualised and historicised'. However, photographs cannot reach back across time and space to their creators. Rather, stripped of their creative contexts they are given new meanings, shaped by new social relationships and new discourses (Back, 2009: 482). Stripped of these contexts, images may be viewed and re-used, 'reframed and repurposed' and saturated with new

meanings with unpredictable consequences for participants (Fink and Lomax, 2012).

Alongside these developments is a growing unease about the way in which images may be used to stigmatise particular groups, particularly poorer and marginalised communities (Connor, 2012; Fink and Lomax, 2014; McKendrick et al, 2008; Parvez, 2011); Wiles et al (2011: 701-2) noting ‘public uneasiness of visual records created of apparently inoffensive acts’. But, as Brent’s (2009) analysis of historical and contemporary visual and textual representations evidences, this is not new. The enduring ‘psychic fascination’ with the ‘other’ is plainly evident in the portrayal of slums and poverty in early 19th-century texts and images. What *is* new, however, are the ways in which contemporary digital images can quickly take on a life of their own and the attendant difficulties for researchers in ensuring participants’ anonymity and privacy while supporting their voices to be heard.

Research contexts

It was in the context of this undercurrent of anxiety about the ethics of imagebased methods that I undertook the research presented in this article. Funded by the Economic & Social Research Council and the Arts & Humanities Research Council, the research comprised a series of participatory projects with children, young people and their families living in low-income neighbourhoods. The first of these (project A) involved working participatively with 14 children and young people aged between eight and 14 over a period of 18 months. This project, in which the children and young people worked together to define the research questions, explored their experiences of life in their neighbourhood. It encompassed working for an intensive period with a film-maker in the production of a short film, which included interviews that the children and young people conducted with their siblings, parents, friends and neighbours about their experiences of living on the estate.

The second project (project B), in a different neighbourhood albeit also low income, involved eight children aged between three and 10 and their families. One of a series of visual projects with children from the estate, this particular project used film and photography (as well as drawing and willow sculpture) to explore the children's and families' use of outdoor space. The children worked with me, as well as a visual artist and a willow sculptor. As with project A, the children chose to interview parents and other adults about their experiences as well as to include drawings and photography in their film.

The research was underpinned by a commitment to working participatively with children and young people, using methods of their choosing and recognising that they have informed perspectives on their worlds. This is supported by a body of sociological theory in which even very young children are seen as having the social and cognitive skills to participate in social research and to have a say on the things that affect them (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). Each project generated a number of visual outputs, including a short film. The film from project A can be read as a film about friendship and the ways in which the social and physical environment of children's neighbourhoods can support relationships and wellbeing. The film from project B explores the importance of green space for play and social connectivity. In both films, the children, young people and adults are clearly visible as film-makers, as subjects (planting in the community garden, playing in the estates' parks) and as interviewers and interviewees. In each film, the contributions of the children and young people, as film-makers, are acknowledged in the film credits.

The decision to acknowledge the involvement of the children and young people in this way reflects the wishes of these particular children and young people. It is also supported by research, which suggests that young people increasingly want to

have their contributions recognised. This includes contemporary research in which children express frustration when they are subject to anonymisation processes (such as pixilation and other post-production digital techniques) and can feel disappointed when their work is unattributed (Wiles et al, 2010). Recent qualitative research, including with children who might be viewed as particularly vulnerable, suggests that, given the choice, participants may prefer to have their contributions recognised. This can include waiving rights to anonymity (Moore, 2012). Children and young people's desire to be named is consistent with the principles of participatory research in which co-researchers take ownership of their research. It is also an important means by which some groups can challenge stigmatisation and through which researchers can acknowledge participants' skills and expertise as knowing subjects (Wiles et al, 2010; Moore, 2012; Brady and Brown, 2013). However, given the longevity of images, it is also important to consider that children and young people may later change their minds about the use of their images. This possibility needs to be balanced with 'right(s) to be seen and heard' (Brady and Brown, 2013: 105).

How to balance our responsibilities with children and young people's 'rights' remains contested. Wiles et al's (2010) survey of visual researchers reveals that while some researchers use identifiable images, seeing any attempts to anonymise as 'akin to erasing identity' (Brady and Brown, 2013: 105), others see anonymisation as necessary to mitigate 'possible future harm' (Wiles et al, 2010: 13). Whatever they decide, visual researchers report feeling conflicted and anxious about these issues, which remain unresolved in the wider discipline.

Researchers' anxieties need to be read in the context of normative research culture, in which anonymisation is a cornerstone of ethical practice (Wiles et al, 2011; Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011; Moore, 2012), albeit one that is increasingly challenged as

paternalistic, unrealistic and harmful (Wiles et al, 2011). For example, Moore (2012) questions the assumption that researchers can in fact guarantee participant anonymity. Participatory research takes time and is, by its very nature, highly visible. Moreover, there is little to prevent participants discussing their involvement with others, including in social media. At a purely practical level, it is almost impossible to anonymise moving images. Still images too are difficult to anonymise, particularly when they feature people, objects and locations that make identification easier (Crow and Wiles, 2008; Wiles et al, 2011). This has led some researchers to abandon the principle of anonymisation on the basis that it is unworkable. As Brent (2009: 14-15) describes in his decision to name the location of his research in Southmead, an area of Bristol in England, any attempt to disguise the location would have necessitated immense subterfuge, resulting in a ridiculous and distracting guessing game.

Brent's comments suggest the need to think about the impact of anonymisation on the ways in which audiences view images and text; not least, the way anonymisation can violate the aesthetic and meaning of images. This is illustrated by Wiles et al.'s discussion, and illustration, of an 'anonymised' image by Andrew Clark (2006) in which the authors argue that the removal of identifiers such as participants' faces may render images meaningless (Wiles et al, 2011). Moreover, 'protecting' participants in this way can have the unintended effect of dehumanising participants, while its widespread use in crime prevention and reality television can invoke an association with criminality (Banks, 2001). At an epistemological level, anonymisation practices that disguise images in this way can render the very point of such data – to communicate and make explicit what text-based methods cannot – worthless (Prosser and Loxley, 2008). This is demonstrated in my research in which the children and young people's appreciation of the social and physical landscape of their neighbourhood is illustrated in the production of images that, in my view are both beautiful and powerful. Of

equal importance are the ways in which the visual outputs exemplified the children's creativity, something that would have been lost with any attempt to anonymise this material.

However, the imperative to anonymise is enduring, leading visual sociologist Paul Sweetman (2009) to argue that the emphasis on 'protection' through anonymisation has blinded researchers to the alternative possibilities, not least the ethical potential of visibility. He offers instead an argument for a 'politics of recognition' in which participants are visible and recognisable, a move which he suggests 'allow(s) for and encourages(s) acknowledgement of the other' (Sweetman, 2009).

Sweetman's approach, although confined here to the work of visual artists and their subjects, offers an alternative perspective on ethics in visual research. This includes questioning the assumption that anonymisation is inherently ethical. Notwithstanding that some participants may want some level of anonymity, and that some topics may be particularly sensitive, Sweetman's argument suggests the need to consider ethics in context on a case-by-case basis, in consultation with participants (Mannay, 2014). It remains the case, however, that children and young people are seen within most ethical and regulatory frameworks as particularly at risk. How to reconcile these potential risks remains unresolved within visual and participatory research with these groups (Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Gabb, 2010; Darian-Smith and Henningham, 2014).

In my research this was highlighted by the particular challenges generated by methods in which children and young people are co-producers of film with others. As I discuss, this raises questions about how to respect individual (including children and young people's) rights to make decisions about how they are seen and heard, balanced with a responsibility to those who are filmed and photographed. The final part of the

article draws on a feminist ethics of care in order to elaborate this process. Drawing on a feminist ethics of care, I explore how my own and participants' anticipation of what may happen when images in which they are clearly identifiable and named (including by association) framed editorial decisions and the implications for children and young people's agency and ethical decision making.

Navigating the ethical challenges of participation, voice and visibility

A feminist ethics of care draws on the idea of 'responsible knowing' (Miller et al, 2012: 134). Founded on principles of attentiveness, responsiveness, competence and responsibility (Tronto, 1993), it provides a conceptual framework for understanding often vaguely expressed notions about researchers' 'own moral frameworks' for guiding ethical research as they emerge in its production and dissemination (Fink and Lomax, 2012). The four principles are discussed in detail elsewhere (Tronto, 1993; Ward and Gahagan, 2010). For the purposes of this article, I focus specifically on the principles of attentiveness and responsibility and the ways in which these values supported me to navigate, to greater or lesser extent, individual participants' wishes with my responsibilities to the wider group, neighbourhood and communities in which the research was located.

Attentiveness and responsibility, as Moore (2012) suggests, mean being attentive to how we, as researchers, listen to participants and incorporate this into our decisions about how to represent their experiences in our research and its dissemination. However, this is not always straightforward. Participants may change their minds or not agree about how to do this and their ideas may come into conflict with our own views about how best to represent individual and collective voices in the visual outputs. As the following examples illustrate, this may be complicated by issues about who is being represented (*these* children and young people or children and young people *in general*)

and compounded by our own, and participants', understanding about ways in which images may be read and assumed to speak for them and for particular groups (such as people living in poverty, marginalised people and other vulnerable groups). This is a significant concern for participatory film-makers and those working with groups of co-researchers in which the aim of the research includes enabling people who might not ordinarily have a voice to communicate their experiences (Wang, 2006).

While there are useful examples of how this has been managed in ways that support important stories to be told while retaining anonymity (Mannay, 2013), the priority in the research projects described here was to enable the visual to communicate the children and young people's experiences in ways of their choosing while balancing our responsibilities to them and the people who they filmed, photographed and interviewed. As I have elaborated elsewhere (Lomax et al, 2011), the children and young people were noticeably attentive to the experiences and ideas of others, incorporating their views into their productive and editorial decisions to ensure fair representation. There were, however, inevitably occasions when ideas about how to do this diverged. These incidents are worth examining as they illustrate tensions about how best to visually represent people's lives in ways that represent their experiences and our ethical responsibilities to participants informed by our different knowledges about the ways in which images might be understood by audiences.

The first example involves a decision to edit a sequence of film in which the children-as-film-makers talked at length to camera about their involvement in an earlier community arts project – painting a wall in the community (illustrated in Figure 1). In the original unedited sequence, the children can be heard talking about what this involved, which parts of the wall each of them painted and what the images meant to each of them. With hindsight it seems unreasonable to have proposed, as

I originally did, that this sequence be edited such that it contained only one child explaining that ‘we painted a wall’, followed by a brief general description of this work. My rationale was that a shorter sequence would work better cinematically, capturing the importance of arts and community projects for children and young people in a way that would effectively engage the viewer (through a short sequence with a clear message). However, the children had other ideas, insisting that the sequence be included in its original unedited form, a decision that appeared to be grounded in the desire to have their individual contributions, as artists and narrators, recognised rather than for one child to speak for all of them (although all the children were to have been included visually in the scene).

The children’s wishes were honoured and the sequence was included in its original unedited form. However, in respecting this decision I was acutely aware, and mildly troubled, that the wider message about the importance of community arts might be lost (as viewers might disengage during this lengthy sequence). So, while the decision to include this sequence was, on balance, the right one, it highlights a tension inherent in participatory visual research predicated on promoting dialogue through voice (Wang, 2006). Rather, it illustrates how decisions made with participants may prioritise ‘being seen’ in ways that may be antithetical to ‘being heard’, raising the possibility that children’s editorial decisions may conflict with the ways that images will be experienced by audiences. This suggests the need to think carefully about how to balance production decisions with responsibilities to our co-researchers whilst being mindful of the ways that the visual may be consumed by audiences (Lomax and Fink, 2010).

These challenges are further exemplified in the children’s decision, in project A, to include a montage of images of pets that they had photographed and filmed

during the project. Although aware of the importance of animals to the children (I was introduced to some of the children's pets and accompanied children as they petted and photographed cats and dogs during fieldwork), I was initially quietly reluctant to include images of the animals in the film. My hesitancy was in part from concern about the ways that images of animals might be interpreted as reinforcing the apollonian image of the child in which children are pictured in visual media in 'the "natural" spaces and places of childhood', outdoors and alongside pets (Fink, 2008: 307; Jenks, 1996). As Figure 2 illustrates, the final film does indeed contain photographs of Snowball (a cat belonging to one of the children) and other pets, which are often experienced as 'cute' by the film's audiences. While these adult readings require systematic study, my concern here is the ways in which such images appear to 'fix' childhoods for adult viewers (Hendrick, 2003). As Holland (2006: 5) writes, images of children are powerful ways of 'sorting and classifying ... of pull[ing] meanings together and bind[ing] them so they can appear natural and irresistible'. This suggests that we need to give proper attention to the ways that images made as part of participatory research may reproduce rather than challenge unequal power relations between adults and children (Cahill, 2007).

A final example arose during the initial screening of the first rough cut of the second film with the film-makers and their parents (who had participated as interviewees). The screening was included as part of a two-stage consent process, informed by a feminist ethics of care. Discussed here is one parent's request, at that screening, to remove a particular sequence in which she was interviewed about her experiences of living on the estate. As she explained: "You said we can take bits out and I'd like that out." Its subsequent omission from the final film is indicative of my commitment to an ethically responsible research relationship in which researchers work with participants to ensure the production of ethically responsible knowledge (Miller et

al, 2012). However, its removal raises questions about who is listened to; whose voice takes priority and the potential limits of children's voices in this context (Mind, 2008). While the children took active roles in the production of this sequence (as interviewers, sound recordists and cameras operator), their opportunities to shape the visual were (necessarily) curtailed as part of a wider duty of care to the (adult) research subject. This example raises issues about the ways in which the visual, rather than enabling a clearer articulation of social issues, may in fact render difficult or controversial perspectives harder to see, certainly in the visual outputs from the research (although see Mannay, 2014, for a discussion of the ways in which poetry and other creative forms can support this process). While for ethical reasons I am unable to elaborate the precise nature of this sequence, the adult participant's unwillingness to be seen and heard describing the hardships of living on a low income needs to be understood in terms of public antipathy towards poorer people (McKendrick et al, 2008; Tyler, 2013). My interpretation of her decision is that, on witnessing herself talking about these issues on screen, she may have considered that her experiences were unlikely to find sympathy and may in fact have subjected her to censure. Her decision not to be seen and heard doing so raises issues about the extent to which attributed and un-anonymised participation can, in some circumstances, limit the articulation of particular experiences. It further evidences the need to balance children and young people's participation with our responsibilities to the wider community and the ways that this may limit children and young people's visual voices.

Conclusion

This article has explored the tension between the aims of participatory visual methods to support children and young people to have a voice and questions about whose voice is heard. It has briefly reviewed traditional and contemporary ethical frameworks, exploring the developing critique of these practices and emerging ideas

about participant visibility in research. It has elaborated on the possibility of a feminist ethics of care for navigating the ethical and moral complexities of co-produced visual research, suggesting that we need, as researchers, to be responsive to participants and to find a balance between their needs while recognising the ways in which this may conflict with our own and others' expectations. In understanding participants' decisions about how they want to be seen, I have suggested that we need, ourselves, to consider the wider contexts in which images are viewed and the ways in which these may, in turn, shape and silence children and young people's voices.

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Figures

Figure 1: Community arts project



Figure 2: Neighbourhood pets



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