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Using Photography as a Creative, Collaborative Research Tool

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Abstract

Drawing on debates in the complementary fields of participatory, youth and visual research methods, the paper discusses an experimental photography project carried out as part of a broader study with young people in Mexico City on spatial experience, belonging and exclusion. The paper describes the mechanics of the project, considers the kind of data it produced, and discusses the different outcomes for participants and researcher, including its difficulties and limitations. It finds that the creative, collaborative approach used has potential for opening the research process to embrace creative, reflexive, complicated “selves,” but warns that this outcome is not automatic: collaboration between visual researchers and social art therapy practitioners would be one important step in realizing the full potential of creative photography in research.

Keywords

Photography, Creative Methodology, Collaborative Research, Visual Methods, Youth

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Using Photography as a Creative, Collaborative Research Tool

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Drawing on debates in the complementary fields of participatory, youth and visual research methods, the paper discusses an experimental photography project carried out as part of a broader study with young people in Mexico City on spatial experience, belonging and exclusion. The paper describes the mechanics of the project, considers the kind of data it produced, and discusses the different outcomes for participants and researcher, including its difficulties and limitations. It finds that the creative, collaborative approach used has potential for opening the research process to embrace creative, reflexive, complicated "selves," but warns that this outcome is not automatic: collaboration between visual researchers and social art therapy practitioners would be one important step in realizing the full potential of creative photography in research. Keywords: Photography, Creative Methodology, Collaborative Research, Visual Methods, Youth

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Youth research and participatory photography in many ways seem natural companions in social research. The challenge set out almost two decades ago by Morrow & Richards (1996, p. 97) for social researchers to "find ways of eliciting children's opinions and experiences" has been comprehensively explored, tested and debated in a burgeoning youth studies literature, particularly within sociology and geography, such that convention in this field now requires that young people be provided with diverse, appropriate, and even *empowering* means through which to take part in research on their lives, in order that we (the adults) may understand their worlds.

The foundations of this new social studies of childhood have been carefully discussed in a number of key works (for example, James et al., 1998; Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Matthews & Limb, 1999), and need not be repeated here except to reiterate some of its key foundations, including the recognition of: (1) the general subordination of children as a social group in late modern society; (2) the importance of a critical understanding of adults' representations of children; (3) individual children's active agency influencing the world they live in; and (4) children's perceptions and use of social space (Hill et al., 2004). A participatory philosophy seems to fit easily into this approach, in aspiring as it does to generate knowledge through an interactive, reflective, collective and transformative research process with different groups of people. More specifically, there is a growing body of work which argues that using visual methods and especially participatory photography in research can provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of (young) people (e.g., Anderson & Jones, 2009; Bolton et al., 2001; Dennis et al., 2009; Ho et al., 2019; Mizen, 2005; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Newman et al., 2006; Rudkin & Davis, 2007; Sime, 2008; Winton, 2005; Young & Barrett, 2001).

This broad context provides the backdrop for the paper. I continue with a more critical reflection on this context, and go on to discuss the particularities of the different uses of photography in social research. The paper then presents a photography project carried out with a group of young women and men in a low-income neighbourhood in Mexico City, which was an experimental attempt to use photography in both a creative and a documentary/narrative capacity in academic research.

Questioning the Notion of Participatory Research

Initial widespread enthusiasm over the *participation revolution* has gradually given way to a steady stream of critiques, making it something of a thorny issue today, particularly as it seems to have become a virtual epistemological orthodoxy in many fields (see Kesby, 2005), youth and development research included. The concerns raised include often misconceived empowerment claims of participatory methodologies (Cornwall, 2000; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Guijt & Shah, 1998; Pain & Francis, 2003; Spyrou, 2011), a lack of attention paid to issues of power in participation more broadly (for example Franks, 2011; Kesby, 2005), the romanticization of the local (e.g., Crawley, 1998), the risk of cooption of the participation process by the already-powerful (Cornwall, 1998), and depoliticized notion of space in participation discourse (e.g., Cornwall, 1998; Guijt & Shah, 1998).

More scathing critiques argue that participation as currently understood and practiced is tyrannical, and fundamentally incompatible with a radical, poststructuralist agenda (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Williams, 2004). However, as Kesby (2005, 2044) points out, rarely are solutions provided to the problems raised, nor are viable substitutions for the energy, optimism, and practical utility of participation offered, and moreover "calls for resistance to *all* forms of power are unnecessarily immobilizing." In this way, it has been important to continue to seek improved ways of doing things, rather than to abandon ship completely when it comes to participatory research.

Many of the debates around participatory approaches resonate across the range of different applications, from policy-based research, to community work, to academic research. Nonetheless, this far-reaching discourse has itself led to some degree of conflation over the possible outcomes of participation in these different settings; it is worth remembering that participatory methods are not inherently empowering. In a policy context, for example, participation involves people's *direct involvement in decision-making* about matters that affect their lives, whether individually or collectively (in contrast to consultation which is limited to seeking people's views) (Hill et al., 2004). While participatory research practice differs from a policy context, it also requires engagement with reflection and change, as summed up by Cahill et al. (2007):

As participatory researchers, we pursue research and other activities with communities (or traditional research *subjects*) as collaborating partners, with the primary goal of working towards positive changes on issues identified by the collective (Kindon et al., 2007). We try to engage in all aspects of research - research questions, the choice and design of methods, the analysis of data, the presentation of findings, and the pursuit of follow up action - as collaborative projects which require negotiation between the different parties. (p. 305)

This may be a useful benchmark for participatory research. In my own research, I have tried to be careful to avoid the label *participatory* when referring only to methods, since participation necessarily involves more than just innovative data collection and an ethical, inclusive approach in the research space (Winton, 2007; also Kesby, 2005; Thomson, 2007). Moreover, although my work has become increasingly collaborative, it still falls short of this framework mentioned by Cahill et al. (*ibid.*), and so I prefer to use the term *collaborative research* which I understand as research that is defined by ethical, active engagement between the researcher and the different actors who enable the research, based on principles of cooperation, respect and mutual benefit. I would argue on the other hand that participatory

practice ought to be defined by *critical collective engagement with problem-solving and action* (see also Finney & Rishbeth, 2007).

Debating Participatory Youth Research

As already mentioned, participatory methodologies have become particularly popular in youth research in recent years, as seemingly ideal tools with which to listen to children and youth on their terms, such that they form a key part of the new social studies of childhood. This has marked an important shift in the way academics and policy-makers engage with children and young people, representing an “important and genuine attempt to include children in the production of knowledge where previously their experiences have been marginalised or indeed absent” (Lomax, 2012: 106). Yet, the common assumption that participatory research generates more *authentic* knowledge of the subjective realities of children and young people (Grover, 2004) has been seen as problematic, in assuming that the (in this case child) self is unproblematically self-aware, expert, and essentially a *knowable* (uncomplicated), if disempowered being. If feminist thought has long posited the notion of knowledge as relational, Thomson (2007, p. 207) asks, “why do we still so often use fixed definitions of identity when it comes to our work with children?” (see also Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). The attempt to empower children and young people by redefining them as human *beings*, rather than incomplete, inferior human *becomings*, which has been so central to the new social studies of childhood, may then be misconceived if this assumes the self to be somehow complete and knowable. Rescuing the relational and messy aspects of identity requires that *all* social actors be viewed as human *becomings*, regardless of age or any other social characteristics (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Thomson, 2007). In this spirit, Luttrell (2010) notes:

I did not assume that there is an authentic, single or neutral voice inside a child to be elicited through an image. Nor did I assume an undifferentiated children’s voice that is set apart from an adult voice. Rather, I sought to understand which voices children would exercise when speaking about their photographs in specific contexts and with multiple audiences in mind. (p. 225)

Moreover, it has been argued that the quest for the “authentic” voices of children and youth not only leads to essentializing notions of identity as outlined above, but has also often led to this group being singled out for special treatment in methodological design.¹ The implication is that children require special consideration to make the research process accessible. Yet, as Thomson (*ibid.*) argues, if we can accept that adults too struggle with language and attention span, that they also are also subject to inequalities, and that they too are human *becomings*, then “the clear, bounded and constructed worlds that separate the child from the adult begin to merge and further dissolve the argument that we need special methods to work with children” (p. 213). Put another way, and to paraphrase Edwards (1997, cited in Thomson, 2007) people’s attention and motivation depend not on their age, but rather on how meaningful the information is to their own life. Using creative, imaginative and diverse methods in qualitative research may be beneficial full-stop, regardless of age, gender etc.; that is, rather than varying (and limiting) the methods themselves according to the characteristics of the group (be they children, women, or any other marginalized group; see also Cornwall, 1998; Stea, 2003), we may be better off focusing on how different actors respond to and use a range of methods in

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¹ Thomson (2007) argues moreover that if we accept identity is performed, multiple and negotiated, then imposing structural categories like “children” goes against the fundamentally bottom-up approach of participatory research.

particular contexts and moments in order to express something about their lives (having recently starting to use drawing with groups of adults, I can see the value of this openness). To better explore the multiplicity of people's voices in the research encounter, we ought to "clear space for more local research narratives to allow space for disagreement and discussion [...] among all human becomings" (Thomson, 2007, p. 216, see also Luttrell, 2010).

Increasingly however, in the field of child and youth research there is awareness of the need to reengage with reflexivity and experimentation instead of seeking *authenticity* (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008), and the importance of not assuming that child-friendly methods are somehow a foolproof way of ensuring research involving children will "achieve ethical and epistemological validity" (Hunleth, 2011, p. 84). For example, Kullman's (2012) idea of *tinkering* is a useful way of managing the intricacies and uncertainties of expression and participation in research. Specifically, she argues that research is an uncertain learning process for all involved, "where both participants and researchers are trying out better ways of relating to the world through the available materials and spaces" (*ibid.*, p. 5; see also Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008 on the idea of *muddling through*; also Lomax, 2012; Mand, 2012). Research seen this way becomes a dialectic (collaborative) project. This paper attempts to engage with some aspects these important debates in practice. That discussion follows a brief account of the use of photography in social research.

Introducing Photography in Social Research

Since photography has always "served as an instrument of communication and as a means of sharing experience" (José van Dijck, 2008, cited in Pink, 2011, p. 95), it seems only natural that it should have gained much currency as a research tool in its own right. Yet photography may not have gained the popularity it now enjoys were it not for three concurrent trends in social research more widely: first, a re-emergence of the visual within social science research, and the increasing attention given to the role of all of the senses in the construction and representation of experience (the so-called *sensory turn*) (Pink et al., 2011); a focus on memory and imagination in research practice (*ibid*; Clover, 2006; Hogan, 2012); and finally, the emergence of the participation paradigm outlined above. These developments have influenced ethnographic practice, allowing on one hand new methodologies to shape the ways we understand the production of scholarly knowledge, and on the other, inviting the development of new and innovative research methods (Pink et al., 2011).

Furthermore, while the use of visual methods in social sciences, particularly anthropology, is not new in itself, it is certainly true to say that the way they are used has changed considerably. As Croghan et al. (2008) note:

in common with the move from realism to the social construction of identity within the social sciences, in photo-elicitation methods the focus has been shifted from seeing the visual as an objective representation of the other (as in much early anthropological work) to seeing it as a collaborative enterprise between observer and observed. (Evans, 1999). (p. 346)

Photo-elicitation methods appear to offer a way of gaining insight into the other's perspective by asking the photographer for their interpretations of the visual and in the process gaining greater access to their constructions of self.

In practical terms, the generation of such a dialogue requires that photography be used in a certain way in research, going beyond the image itself to consider the context of its production and significance (see Pink et al., 2011). Termed *participant-employed photography*,

or participatory photography, this involves photographs being taken by participants and used to elicit the participant-photographer's own narrative (Castleden et al., 2008). Thus used, photography is seen to be closely aligned with lived experience, and consequently more representative of how participants themselves interpret their context, relationships, decisions and realities (Castleden et al., 2008; Liebenberg, 2009; Murray, 2009; Svensson et al., 2009), allowing people to show (and tell) their stories and realities in new ways (Bolton et al., 2001; Clover 2006; Croghan et al., 2008; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Newman et al., 2006; Singhal et al., 2007), letting us tap into the complexities of social relationships in ways that elude more conventional means of investigation (Mizen, 2005; Luttrell, 2010), and perhaps even bridging the different worlds of the researcher and the researched (Croghan et al., 2008).

Yet, it may be more useful to think in terms of *dialogue* than *narrative* when using photographs in the research encounter. If it is understood that one's access to self is non-linear and incomplete, then "[photographs] present multiple ways of knowing - through perception, signs and symbols ... Thus, it does not offer some single lens authority, but affords multiple perspectives and interpretations" (Parker 2005, cited in Packard, 2008, p. 68). Moreover, as Harper (2002, p. 23) succinctly notes, "when two or more people discuss the meaning of photographs they try to figure out something together. This is, I believe, an ideal model for research." Photography may then be seen as a catalyst for a reflexive dialogue in research, and perhaps as a response to the call - mentioned above - for greater reflexivity (e.g., Clover, 2006) and experimentation (e.g., Kullman, 2012) in participatory research.

In large part, that participatory photography can open up new ways of telling stories and communicating lived experiences has to do with the fact that photography allows people to show the spaces of their lives. This is important not only in the sense that photographs offer researchers to access to the otherwise inaccessible personal and/or private spaces of participants (Liebenberg, 2009), but moreover it is the very act of locating experiences in space which allows them to be told and viewed in new ways: it matters *where* things happen (e.g., Anderson & Jones, 2009; Dennis et al., 2009; Rudkin & Davis, 1997; Svensson et al., 2009). Put another way, participatory photography is a means of directly engaging with people's socio-spatial lives, and thus of enhancing our understandings of the constitution of people's lived space (see Anderson & Jones, 2009; Pink, 2011).

Furthermore, this very act of looking can change the way the world is seen. In making photographs, participants may contemplate the reason behind the images, their gaze and its subsequent meaning (Liebenberg, 2009). The camera, then, creates a distance between subject and object, between the participants and their embodied experience, which in turn may invite contemplation and deeper reflection (see Dennis et al., 2009; Ho et al., 2010). It is this act of looking, and the process of reflection it enables, that together feed into a vision of participatory photography as a potentially transformative development tool: photographs can capture and tell people's power-imbued contexts.

One of the most well-known approaches to participatory photography is *photovoice*, popularized by Wang and Burris (1997) as a participation action research tool, which uses participants' photographs as a catalyst to engage participants and policy-makers in group dialogue for social change (Wang, 2005, in Castleden et al., 2008). The approach draws heavily on Freirian critical education and feminist theory, as well as work on documentary photography and the use of storytelling through photographs (Wang, 2000), and aims to enable people to record and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns, to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about community issues through group discussions of photographs; and to reach policymakers (Ho et al., 2010). Participatory photography of this nature – like participatory action research more broadly – ideally “sits at the interface of theory, method, and praxis” (Singhal et al., 2007, p. 224).

Although the approaches outlined thus far have been significant in opening up space for reflection and dialogue in the research process, within them the actual practice of taking photographs is sidelined. Kullman (2012) mentions the need to pay attention to the ways in which researchers can engage with participants during fieldwork, experimenting with different media and thinking about how images are recorded. But a holistic understanding of the *process* of photography can go beyond fieldwork practices. In creative collaborative photography, artistic elements of the process of producing images become part of the research. It was this idea that motivated the pilot project discussed below, and one of the aims of this paper is to discuss how and why creative aspects of photographic research methods might be developed.

Towards Creative Collaborative Photography: Imagination in Research Practice

A key component of creativity, and a good place to begin this short discussion, is imagination. I mentioned above a growing interest in incorporating imagination in social research, as compellingly expressed by Clover (2006): “our understandings of learning, knowledge, meaning-making, and empowerment would only be enriched if we included imagination and its ability to invent new lives, new spirits, new spaces, and new forms of social engagement” (p. 288).² A key mechanism through which this may occur is in incorporating the principles of art therapy in ethnographic research. As Hogan and Pink (2010) suggest:

Art in art therapy is of significance not only as a representation of the feelings of the individual at a particular moment in time—an inner *snapshot*, if you like. [...] Rather, in social art therapy, images are understood as containing multiple and contradictory selves, at odds with essentialist notions of unitary selfhood. A feminist art therapy sees images as producing and being produced through a *self in process*. (p. 160)

Thus, if these techniques are applied in a research setting, they may assist the researcher in understanding other people's interiority (Hogan & Pink, 2010).³ Hogan and Pink (*ibid.*) report an already fertile crossover between social science research and personal therapy, represented by both social art therapy and phototherapy; these encompass a range of practices, but in all cases participants are concerned with self-exploration and self-expression through art or photographic materials.

While image-making in general can be seen as a window into people's imaginative and interior worlds, memory and reverie in particular are perhaps most strongly associated with photography. Photographic images stir an emotional response, and as Harper (*ibid.*, p. 13) argues, images “evoke deeper elements of human consciousness that do words.” It is also possible that the emotional power of photographs also has to do with the fact that memories, experiences and emotions are strongly linked to a sense of place: photographs, then, expose our emotional sense of place.

Moreover, both art therapy and art-based enquiry may also pay attention to collective aspects of artistic expression. As Hogan and Pink (2010) mention with reference to feminist art therapy, this “does not focus on interior states and the transforming self in isolation but,

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² In itself, art may have a lot to offer other disciplines, including the notion of art's “provisionality,” that is, as fundamentally incomplete and “requiring a spectator's input in order to exist or function” (O'Reilly, 2011, p. 2)

³ The idea of “image-work” developed by Edgar (2004, cited in Hogan & Pink, 2010) to denote a range of creative “imagination-based research methodologies” is an example of such an application.

like social anthropology, understands individuals as situated in institutional, social, cultural and power-imbued contexts," (p. 166) (perhaps opening up the possibility for collective reflection and the challenging of dominant discourses).⁴

Yet there are differences and tensions. In art therapy, the process of making the image is often more important than the finished product (Pink et al., 2011), whereas research is often more concerned with translating images and narratives into words, and "normative scholarly and academic outcomes" (Edgar, 2004, in Hogan & Pink, 2010, p. 164). However there is scope for these approaches to pave the way for challenges to epistemological disciplinary assumptions (Hogan, 2012). Failing that, it is certainly possible to combine academic and non-academic outcomes within research (see below), and more specifically, to make creative spaces in the research setting. In this way, just as Newman et al. (2001, in Purcell, 2007) warn that it is counterproductive to subvert artistic endeavour solely for development ends, perhaps building creative spaces in academic research is valuable in ways that go beyond immediate academic outcomes.

Creative, Collaborative Photography in Mexico City: *Proyecto Vidas Imagenadas* (Image-ned Lives Project)

In the context of the preceding discussion, the particular case I wish to present here is that of a small photography project carried out with a group seven young people (2 female and 5 male) aged between 14 and 20, in a marginalized community in Mexico City. This was part of a wider research project on spaces of exclusion and belonging among young people in Mexico City, which aimed to:

- Examine processes and relationships which contribute to the production of meaningful spaces for different young people;
- Examine the production of barriers and exclusionary spatial practices at a local scale;
- Identify impacts of spatial belonging and exclusion on young people's wellbeing.

This project comprised work with different groups of young people in a range of settings. To understand the local spatial practices and experiences of young people in given structural contexts required an in-depth, multimethod approach, based on a critical adoption/adaptation of frameworks emerging from feminist (reflexivity, situated not absolute knowledge), participatory (prioritizing ethics and local knowledges) and youth (capable social actors) methodologies.

Research on spatial or mobility practices benefits from similarly mobile or spatial research methods (e.g., Kullman, 2012; Murray, 2009). Thus, the project included different qualitative methods such as walking interviews, in-depth interviews and group diagramming, together with the photography under discussion here. Photography not only seemed a vital tool through which to explore spatial experiences and practices, but also emerged from a desire to improve on my previous more superficial attempts at integrating photography into research (for example, Winton, 2007), from a sense of the potential for creative methods to enrich research encounters, and from the desire to make the research less one-sided in terms of its outcomes.

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⁴ See Kesby (2005) and Thomson (2007) for an interesting discussion on the importance of viewing participation as a spatial practice.

I was fortunate to be able to collaborate with an NGO already working with young people in the area by creating safe, creative spaces for them within the community, and whose staff shared an enthusiasm for visual media. This collaboration was important not only in facilitating the project, but it also meant that the project could feed into the broader NGO program, and become less of a one-off activity. Linking activities to broader educational and development aims was part of the philosophy of the organization, and so there was considerable fit between our goals.

The young people who participated in the photography project were all involved some way as beneficiaries of the NGO programs (mainly in computing and music). In setting up the project I had a number of meetings with NGO staff at their headquarters, presenting and adjusting the proposal, and deciding which of their local centres would be most appropriate. Once that was decided, I made a number of informal visits to get to know the centre, its staff and the young people involved, and to start to see who would be interested in participating. Once the project began, among countless subtle dynamics of my position as a white, British woman, living and working in Mexico City, I became especially aware that my role as workshop leader/instructor dominated that of researcher, which was particularly significant for how they perceived me as their “audience” in the project, and as a consumer of their photographs (see below). In the remainder of the paper, I present the project, reflect on its successes and failures, and consider where it fits into the wider debates outlined above.

Basic Principles of the Project

Some of the overall aims of this photography project were fairly common to work of this nature: for collaborators to take photographs of their lived socio-spatial experiences, for these photographs to be discussed and reflected on individually and collectively, and finally that the photographs be exhibited for the wider community to see. But the project contained other elements which were less conventional: specifically, that it aimed to foster the artistic and creative side of photography, and that the tools used would be film single-lens reflex (SLR) cameras⁵ rather than the usual automatic, disposable cameras (e.g., Croghan et al., 2008; Luttrell, 2010; Packard, 2008; Rice *et al.*, 2013; White et al., 2010; Young and Barrett, 2001;) or digital cameras (e.g., Clover, 2006; Finney & Rishbeth, 2006; Kullman, 2012; Van House, 2011). There is certainly something to be said for letting participants choose the type of camera used (e.g., Clover, 2006), but in this case the idea was to explicitly engage with the mechanics of photography.

Concretely, film SLR cameras were used in order to be able to easily teach about the basic principles and mechanics of photography, to give the group the chance to learn something unusual and not otherwise easily accessible, and to experiment with this medium as a research tool. The training aspect of the project was envisaged as a way of directly contributing something tangible for the young people taking part in the project, in the form of new skills and knowledge (see also Finney & Rishbeth, 2006).

Phase One: Workshops

The first phase of the project consisted of a series of six three-hour training workshops held over a period of two weeks (see Figure 1).

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⁵ The cameras were completely manual (none had an automatic setting), and they did not have a flash.

Figure 1. Training workshop

Photograph: author

These sessions were given jointly by me and a student volunteer recruited via the NGO, and were designed to be as practical and interactive as possible. By the end of the training sessions, it was hoped that the collaborators would be able to take photographs independently.

The themes dealt with in these initial workshops included photography in general and their individual experiences of it, an introduction to the basic principles of photography, and a more detailed and hands-on exploration of how the SLR cameras worked. There was some disagreement over whether or not to include sessions on composition. I did not wish to include this in the course, feeling that it would unduly limit or influence the photographs taken (as Ballerini (1997, p. 179) puts it, “force-feeding dominant aesthetics to those perceived as having no legitimate culture of their own”), but for my co-instructor – a media and communication student – this was a vital part of the course. The compromise we reached was that this topic would be given far less weight overall than the technical aspects, and that it would take the form of discussion rather than instruction.

Both colour and black and white films were used in order that the group explore the particularities of each, but in the end they showed far greater enthusiasm for representing their lives in colour (see also Wang & Burris, 1997). Each person was allocated a total of 40 photographs: 20 colour and 20 black and white. Interestingly, one took less than their quota, saying “*I have already said what I wanted to say*”.

After these training workshops, we held practice sessions within the NGO premises (see Figure 2). The photographs resulting from these supervised sessions were developed externally, and analyzed by the whole group in a follow-up workshop in terms of what went right/wrong, and discussing how any technical problems might have been avoided. This workshop also included a discussion of the ethics of taking photographs, issues of consent, and of safety (see also Liebenberg, 2009; Wang, 2000).

Figure 2. Practice session

Photograph: author

Phase Two: Independent Photography

During the week following the practice session, the group took turns with the cameras, each having at least two days with a camera in order to take their photographs. The instructions they received in terms of what to take were intentionally minimal – “take photos of what you want to tell us about your world. What is in that world?” While it would have been interesting and desirable to continue with follow-up questions and themes, proposed and agreed by the collaborators themselves, here it was only possible to complete one cycle. In terms of logistics, the group had to organize sharing of the three cameras and their films, record the details of each photograph so they could be identified and analyzed afterwards, and ensure that everyone could have enough access to a camera during the week.

In contrast to Dennis et al. (2009; also Kullman, 2012), who found that accompanying participants as they took their photos allowed the researchers to “observe them in their own place creating an additional layer of information” (p. 469), here it was considered that researcher presence would unduly affect and limit the photos,⁶ and it was also seen as an important demonstration of trust that they be left in charge of the cameras. It was decided that a preferable strategy would be to take a separate guided walk (or *walking interviews*) in the neighbourhood with each collaborator, thus giving space to alternative or complementary accounts, without this affecting the making of the photographs. Indeed, this strategy turned out to be a useful way of revealing to some extent what was *not* taken in the photographs, something recognized to be an important (but elusive) element of analysis (see Singhal et al., 2007; also below).

Once the photos were all taken and developed, the researcher met with each collaborator individually for a recorded conversation about the images. They were also asked if there were any photographs they would not feel comfortable sharing with the group (there were none), and from there the photographs were discussed in two group sessions. These

⁶ Yet as Mannay (2013) observes, this stepping-back only alters the power dynamic with the researcher: “when the intrusive presence of the researcher steps out, this leaves a space that is often filled by the intrusive presence of significant others: siblings, partners, parents and friends” (p. 137).

discussions were a chance to collectively reflect on the content of the photographs and the process of taking them.

All collaborators were given a copy of their photographs to keep, and a diploma for having completed the course. One camera was also left with the NGO. The project concluded with two public exhibitions, one in a church hall and the other in a public park. The photographers who took part in the exhibition⁷ were asked to select four photographs to show, and to give each one a title and a short commentary. All but one chose for their name to appear on their work.⁸

Presenting the Photos They Took

In contrast to the kind of *snapshot* photography associated with automatic cameras (Croghan et al., 2008), and the increasingly communicative, *everyday*, experiential photography associated with digital cameras (Kullman, 2012; Pink, 2011; Van House, 2011), when using a film SLR camera it necessarily takes longer to create an image, particularly if still relatively unfamiliar with the camera, and the fact that the number of shots was limited meant that they had to think carefully about what to take. This could be seen as encouraging greater creativity and reflexivity (prolonging the *gaze* of the photographer), whereas the *limitless* nature of digital photography perhaps allows greater spontaneity and experimentation in terms of composition (see Clover, 2006; Kullman, 2012; Van House, 2011), although the SLR in turn allows greater technical experimentation. Whatever the case, the type of camera certainly will have influenced the type of images that were taken.

Yet, from the photographs taken in this project, it is clear that the cameras were used in a range of different ways in terms of style, content and motive (see Figures 3 to 10): many contain movement, and include a range of subjects and viewpoints. The commentaries on the photos show a range of motivations, from being creative, unusual or aesthetic, a technical accomplishment, highlighting something particular about their lived experience, or a combination of these.

Figure 3. The Flower and the Cross
 “It is a pretty thing, in an interesting place.”

Photograph by Ivan, 14

⁷ Only five of the seven collaborators showed their photos in the exhibition. The two who did not present their photos finished the course, but were not able/chose not to attend subsequent sessions geared towards the exhibition.

⁸ The names that appear alongside the photographs and words of collaborators are their real names; when this issue was discussed, all but one said they wanted their real names to be used. In the case of the young man who wanted to remain anonymous, no name is used. While it is generally considered good ethical research practice to change names to protect the identity of collaborators, in this case it seemed inappropriate to deny them ownership of their words and photos, particularly since the photographs were personally important to them.

Figure 4. Fish and Sky

“I like how the sky is reflected in the water, the fish looks like it’s in the clouds”

Photograph by Ivan, 14.

Figure 5. My neighbours

“One day I was walking along with the camera, and I saw the kids playing in some gardens near my house. They posed for the photo and I took it. I like how it came out.”

Photograph by Abril, 17.

Figure 6. My friends

“Boxing is just for fun.”

Photograph by Ivan, 14.

Figure 7. Free children

“The children playing, I like that it came out totally clear, not blurry at all.”

Photograph by Fernando, 20.

Figure 8. Girl at the computer

“The girl is into the computer, really concentrating – she didn’t see me at all. By learning this she will get on in life, she will achieve things.”

Photograph by Anon

Figure 9. The pyramid

“The pyramid used to be nice, but over time, apart from the rain and the fact that it’s just made of earth, kids bring hammers and start to wreck it. And they drink and take drugs there.”

Photograph by Anon

Figure 10. A moment to enjoy
 “It was a great landscape.”

Photograph by Fernando, 20.

Endogenous Project Outcomes: What's in it for Them?

Starting with the process of learning the mechanics of manual photography, the project gave collaborators knowledge of the fundamentals of photography, and they were all able to take successful photographs. Indeed, they were often surprised and pleased to see the results of their efforts, as Cristian, aged 18, exclaimed when he saw one of his first pictures (taken up into the branches of a tree): "I really like this one! Because it's so clear, and it was one of my first ones! But it came out well. All the green came out, I really like it." While some were daunted at first, and confidence with the cameras was mixed, they got to grips with the cameras and started helping each other out when they had problems during the practice sessions which was gratifying for the workshop leaders.

Time and resource limitations notwithstanding, I would have to disagree with Packard (2008), who suggests that it is preferable to use low-cost cameras in research as this "increases the probability that participants will be familiar with the technology," and minimizes the "unequal power dynamic [that] is immediately and irrevocably established the moment the researcher must instruct a participant on how to operate a piece of equipment" (p. 64). Indeed, it seems that the *reverse* may be the case. As Packard himself notes in the context of his research with homeless men using disposable cameras, they were uncomfortable asking for help to operate the cameras precisely because they understood that they should be able to work something so everyday without any trouble. Because of this, they were not able to produce "accurate or descriptive photographs" (*sic*) which thus "impaired their ability to communicate their stories" (*ibid.*, p. 74). In the present case, instruction was not problematic in the way Packard mentions; indeed, the very fact that the technology was not everyday gave collaborators a sense of achievement once they understood and dominated something of which most people have little or no knowledge (see also Chakraborty, 2009; Clover, 2006).

Certainly, when asked afterwards what they thought of the project, they mentioned that it was *fun*, *interesting*, and *cool*, but also sometimes *heavy-going*. The fact that all but one of the eight original collaborators saw the project through is not only testament to their commitment, but also suggests that they had an overall positive experience. Previous personal experience, and observation of a range of different NGO's work with young people attests to the challenges of maintaining interest and attendance in any projects that require repeated participation, however enthusiastically the project may be received at first. So this was

definitely a good sign, although it must be said from the outset the odds were favourable, as the group was already quite well-consolidated and used to working together. In contexts where the group is new, or where collaborators have more complex life circumstances, the time commitment required for this kind of project is likely to be a problem.

As mentioned above, incorporating a photography course into the project was a key aspect of the collaboration. In most research projects, the researcher stands to gain far more than the participants, and although the achievements of this project were very modest, the fact that in it the young people involved were not only sharing parts of their lives, but also received a beginner's photography course, tipped the balance in favour of a slightly more equitable exchange.

Something else mentioned at the end of the process was pride in being able to show their photos to friends and family, and (among those who opted-in to the exhibition) at having their photographs publically displayed (see also Clover, 2006). One collaborator even managed to get some temporary work with a local photographer he knew as a result of the course. In itself, the process seems to have been positive for those who took part, above and beyond any other goals in terms of research (see also Finney & Rishbeth, 2006). The accounts here echo Chakraborty's (2009) project with young Muslim women: "I got to hang out with my friends and didi (the workshop leader) and learn the camera. It doesn't matter if that is the only thing that came out of this" (p. 431). It may be pertinent, then, to think about creating research spaces not only for collective reflection and action (Kesby, 2005; Thomson, 2007), but also for enjoyment which may be a relevant outcome in itself.

A process mentioned above, and which is potentially beneficial for both participant and researcher, is the way in which the act of looking through a camera lens can change the way the world is seen. Discussions during this project indicate exactly this kind of reflection, as shown in the following comment in conversation with the researcher:

Before the photo thing, I said that I couldn't care less about my neighbourhood, but now with the photos, I look at them and say - what's happening here? I mean, now I see the images another way, I even want to help my neighbourhood, and the photos helped to see what's happening (...) I wasn't even interested, the photography has helped me loads.

The young people involved also seemed to gain a new appreciation for the positive aspects, or *assets* (Wang & Burris, 1997) of their neighbourhoods, and these personal reflections as a whole were shared in group discussion.

I would like to finish this section with a brief comment on creativity. On one hand, collaborators often displayed considerable creativity and depth of thought in making and presenting their photos; for example, Ivan's explanation of his photograph of a dead fish at the side of the road that caught his eye (see Figure 4), or Emilio's comment on his photograph of a flight of seemingly grimy, moss-covered steps: "I like how it came out, I feel that for me each step has something, a value. And only at the top do you reach your goal." Creativity may be something positive and life affirming in its own right, yet for this creativity to take on new meaning, it must be shared – it is through dialogue that creativity becomes transformative. Might it be that the notion that involving photographs in qualitative research can promote creativity in individuals by stimulating critical thinking and reflection (Burke & Evans, 2011, cited in Simmonds et al., 2015), may actually work in reverse, such that emerging creativity can – under the right conditions – stimulate critical thinking and reflection?

Exogenous Project Outcomes: What's in it for the Researcher?

For this project to be considered a useful research endeavour, naturally it must produce data. But what kind of data are produced? How can we read the meaning of the photos? And how may they be analyzed as data alongside other data produced in the study? In this kind of collaborative (or participatory) work, the initial reading of the photographs takes place not by the researcher, but rather by those who took them, through their own commentary. In essence, we ask people who took the photos to explain them to their audience (what do they mean: who or what appears, and why), after which a second layer of meaning is added through group discussion of the photos. Finally, away from the research encounter in the hands of the researcher, the photos alongside the commentaries and discussions are analyzed as research data. Yet, even if we understand these meanings as situated and multiple, this seemingly smooth transition from meaning to analysis may not be straightforward or given. As Kullman (2012) cautions: "insisting only on the meanings of images may sometimes conceal the affective, multi-sensuous and open-ended aspects of both children's picture-making and their daily experiences" (p. 12).

The comments from the photographers in this study that appeared alongside their photos in the exhibition are testament to this. There are all kinds of things going on when a photo is taken, not to mention the many meanings that can subsequently be read into it by both photographer and observer through their gaze. Since the context of the photos taken here was primarily a photography course, albeit within a research project, participants' first reading of the photos was often aesthetic. Here, this kind of comment was seen as legitimate, given the fact that the successful production of the photos was an important part of the process, and also often a surprise to them. But what does this mean for the value of these images as data for research purposes? How should these meanings be understood in relation to the research questions? It would scarcely seem logical to embrace creative methods in order to produce unusual, complex information, only to then reduce this richness to one-dimensional analysis. Multi-dimensional, open-ended analysis is a challenge, but arguably it is helped by using a creative approach which *embraces* multiple meanings, as a collaborative attempt to "figure out something together" as Harper (2002, p. 23) suggested, opening up new ways of telling stories, of communicating lived experiences. In this context, the challenge is to understand the *significance* of a particular photograph, so as to better interpret its meaning.

In this case, this reflexive dialogue was felt most when photographs were brought in contact with other means of knowing. One particular example of this was a young man who spoke to different versions of the same place through different methods. The place in question is one of the public parks in the neighbourhood, which includes the stone pyramid shown in Figure 9. He chose his photograph of the pyramid as one of his four to be exhibited, and interestingly in his public comments he chose a more traditional rhetoric of drugs and vandalism to explain its poor condition (see Figure 9). Similarly, he said of another of his photos, this time of the vandalized playground equipment in the same park:

They put this stuff there for the kids, but they just go there to get high and all that, so... there's that metal there, they could sell it, so they break off the metal steps, the handles, they break it all off for the same reason, for drugs. So it's sad too.

Later on in the project, he began talk about his own ongoing involvement with gangs; although he previously presented himself as an ex-gang member, it turned out that his gang involvement remained complicated. His treading the line of gang involvement, and what this meant for the stories he told about his neighbourhood, became visible in the way he presented

different discourses about this same space. During a walking interview, he talked in detail about how the park was carefully divided among different local gangs; he described a highly organized space, with a neutral “buffer” area where scores could be settled. Nor was this a recent phenomenon: since his father was young, this park had been an important place for local gangs. So, he now explained, the recent vandalism he photographed in the park was not thoughtless, but rather a protest against the way the authorities had intervened there when they redesigned it and installed new equipment:

[The authorities] should have asked them what they wanted, but they didn't. They just came and started moving things around [...] I feel that the kids got mad, and started to get rid of things, because their territory changed.

So he presented different aspects of his self at different moments, for different audiences, and crucially *through different means*.

The walking interview - as well as providing a means of accessing knowledge that is inherently socio-spatial (Anderson, 2004, as cited in Murray, 2009) - is also useful in providing insights into the photographs that *weren't* taken.⁹ After all, as White et al. (2010) suggest, photographs must be understood as “(in some way) contrived, staged, constructed and posed, the result of deliberate decisions about what to see and what not to see” (p. 150). There are all kinds of factors at play in the decision-making process involved in making a photograph, including the individual's relationship to the space in which the photo was taken, their perception of their audience (imagined or real), their relationship with and perception of the researcher, their relationship to others participating in the project. Indeed, this goes back to the very roots of social psychology, a discipline which attempts “to understand and explain how the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of other human beings” (Allport, 1954, as cited in Mannay, 2013, p. 142).

To give just one example from the current project, it was generally the case that the more edgy parts of the neighbourhood did not appear in photographs. This is partly due to the fact that many of the participants tried to avoid these areas, but in other cases, walking interviews revealed spaces that were strongly socially controlled. During such an outing with Emilio, for example, twice he whispered to me *not here, I'll tell you later* (it turned out we had passed by a religious shrine contested by two rival gangs, and later a small park which was notorious as a point of sale for local drug dealers), and at another spot he indicated with his head, and said in a hushed voice *over there, that place I was telling you about*, which I recognized as a now fenced-off playground, once at the heart of a period of intense violence in the community. These examples give some idea of the different layers of socio-spatial experience and knowledge that can be revealed when different methods or tools are used simultaneously. It also speaks to a concept of voice that is “dialogic, cultural, social and psychological” (Luttrell, 2010, p. 225), while leaving room to “remain skeptical, cautious and curious about the relationship between what we can see and what we can know through this [photography] mode of inquiry” (*ibid*, p. 234).

Limitations

The experimental nature of this project makes its methodological *immaturity* and incompleteness (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008) all the more apparent. Before concluding,

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⁹ It is always important to bear in mind the limitations as to what can be photographed, and to try to observe what is *not* photographed.

therefore, it is worth briefly reflecting on the limitations of this approach in general, and the shortcomings of this project in particular. In general terms, one of the most immediate drawbacks is the limited number of people who can be involved at any one time. One way to overcome this, and also to create a stronger collective momentum (see below) would be to carry out a series of concurrent training courses with a number of small groups, which could then feed into a wider group dynamic. Yet, a general limitation is that it people whose life circumstances make such lengthy, time-intensive participation difficult are unlikely to be able to take part in this type of project, such that it is not widely accessible.

In this particular project, while I feel it was valuable for the training part of the course to be intensive as this generated learning momentum, it certainly would have been beneficial to have been able to extend subsequent analysis and discussion sessions over a longer period of time. As it was, the process remained more focused at the individual level, with less time in the end for collective discussion than I hoped. This was in large part due to funding and logistical problems which meant the project was shorter than was planned at the outset, so there was less opportunity to develop a more collective process (cf. Castleden et al., 2008; Clover, 2006). In this way, more could have been done to develop the cross-over - described above in relation to social art therapy practices - from individual interior states, to collective reflection and the challenging of dominant discourses (Hogan & Pink, 2010).

In future projects, then, it will be important to pay more explicit attention to the interplay between individual and collective creative processes during a project of this kind, and to plan more carefully a strategy for detailed and prolonged follow-up. Indeed, after initial training, the project could be extended substantially, tackling new issues through an evolving creative engagement with each other and with their lived experiences. Collaboration with art therapy experts would greatly enrich the project and increase the likelihood that this bridging take place. A sense of group ownership within a project is vital if the shift is to be made from creativity for its own sake, to creativity as a means of expressing and forging a common group identity, as is powerfully illustrated by Clover (2006; see also Lomax, 2012 and Hunleth, 2011 on participant-led dynamics).

Final Remarks

This paper has explored some of the issues involved in the use of creative, collaborative photography in research. Although the achievements of the project discussed here were very modest, it has enabled some reflection on the wider epistemological and methodological debates surrounding participatory, youth and visual methods, in which it is enmeshed. In methodological terms this project was successful in that it employed a method that proved to be relevant and meaningful for those taking part. It was not age-appropriate, then, as much as it was just appropriate. In a more personal sense, I have found photography to be an enriching research method; to share with people in this way through engaging in the creative process may be an intrinsically valuable part of the research encounter. I have found plenty of reasons to embrace the reintegration of the notion of situated knowledge in research with young people. Yet, it is important to remember that creative, reflexive, complicated selves are not automatically revealed: collaboration between visual researchers and social art therapy practitioners would be one important step in realizing the full potential of creative photography in research. Despite its frustrations and limitations, this experimental, collaborative research project left me inspired to continue developing and improving my use of creative methods to enrich research practice.

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