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The Ground They Walk On: Photography and Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

In this project, the author explores a novel variation on an established social science research method, photo-elicitation. The author photographed eight school principals during a two-year period and asked the principals to respond to the photographs by writing narratives below each. The author uses photography, reflections, and her own memories to construct descriptive narrative snapshots of the eight principals. Further, the author argues that this approach underscores how photographs are both technically and socially constructed and through the use of photo-elicitation new ways of understanding self and others in relation can be explored.

Keywords

Key Words: Narrative Inquiry, Photography, and Photo-Elicitation

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The Ground They Walk On: Photography and Narrative Inquiry

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In this project, the author explores a novel variation on an established social science research method, photo-elicitation. The author photographed eight school principals during a two-year period and asked the principals to respond to the photographs by writing narratives below each. The author uses photography, reflections, and her own memories to construct descriptive narrative snapshots of the eight principals. Further, the author argues that this approach underscores how photographs are both technically and socially constructed and through the use of photo-elicitation new ways of understanding self and others in relation can be explored. Key Words: Narrative Inquiry, Photography, and Photo-Elicitation

Introduction

In my opinion, no one can claim to have truly seen something until he has photographed it. (Emile Zola as quoted in Sontag, 1980, p. 86)

For most of my life I could not have understood Zola's observation. I am afraid I have been guilty of walking past beautiful settings and thinking, "If only I had my camera I could capture this." Once I began to understand how complex capturing an image is, I realized how photography could change my vision of the world around me. The idea for this project came from my son, Lucas, who was a student in an art college at the time. Although he was majoring in film, he had begun taking photographs with a 35 millimeter camera. "I want to be able to use your camera," I told him, and he began helping me learn. From my tutorial sessions with him my interest in taking photographs continued to grow. Lucas was a good teacher and always patient, although I was slow to learn to "adjust the aperture" and "pay attention to the light." It was good advice for anyone, but away from him, when I had to do it on my own, I found the camera a tool I would battle, but I still wondered about the value of photography as a tool to help me to see myself in new ways that could be markedly different from texts and conversations.

In the beginning, I started this project to learn how to use the camera more proficiently. I wanted to overcome my initial anxieties of incompetency, and I thought I could do just that by connecting my newfound interest in photography to something about which I felt quite confident: my students, school leaders, who are such an important part of my life and professional focus. At first, I had trouble taking a good photograph. An intense sense of panic would set in each time I was about to take a picture. What if I could not remember anything Lucas had taught me? Intuitively, I knew that putting the camera on an "automatic" setting felt like cheating, or even failure, so I persisted, knowing that I would have to become comfortable trusting my eye and believing in my

ability to succeed, not unlike the message that I teach the very same students whom I had started to photograph.

As my photographic interest and ability developed, so did a curiosity about how I might use photographs to learn about the social world. At about the same time Lucas also shared with me the work of Jim Goldberg (1985, 1995, 2007) who was a professor at the school he attended. Goldberg takes pictures of people and asks his subjects to add text to the photographs. These comments, which are superimposed on the photographs, are the subject's own written reflections about their lives. Because Lucas spoke constantly about Goldberg's work and its profound influence on him, I, too, became highly engaged and excited about the idea and its implications for me and my newfound interest in how photography captures the social construction of whatever the photographer seeks to preserve in an image. Furthermore, when Lucas would come home from college, he and I would have lengthy conversations together about Goldberg's work. "This is social science research," I would say. "No! This is art," he would reply, and so it would go.

Despite our different interpretations of Goldberg's (1985, 1995, 2007) work, this exposure had a profound and inspirational impact on me. It was at this time in my impromptu study of photography that I came to understand that photographs could serve as a valuable, interpretive text. That realization gave me a new kind of purpose when taking photographs. By taking the time to reflect on the pictures I took, I could explore and study them as photographic texts and learn: (a) how I as the photographer compose and understand these texts; (b) how the subjects of my photographs help me to compose their portraits and how they interpreted their portraits as visual texts; (c) how these photographic texts may shape my subjects' understanding of themselves as educational leaders; and (d) how the combination of the photographs and written texts may contribute to the general public's understanding of educators' lives and work.

The theory underlying this inquiry aligns with Harper's (1994) observations about photo-elicitation. When images are fed back to subjects Harper notes:

A shocking thing happens...the photographer, who know his or her photograph as its make (often having slaved over its creation in the darkroom) suddenly confronts the realization that he or she knows little or nothing about the cultural information contained in the image. As the individual pictured...interprets the image, a dialogue is created in which the typical research roles are reversed. The researcher becomes a listener and one who encourages the dialogue to continue. The individual who describes the images must be convinced that his or her taken-for-granted understanding of the images is not shared by the researcher, often a startling realization for the subject as well. (p. 410)

Photographs have to be taken and organized, but ultimately they have to be presented in a way that can be verbalized. Collier and Collier (1986) assert:

The analysis of photographs includes the decoding of visual components into verbal (usually written) forms of communication. No analysis of photographs can ignore this crucial translation process, although it may be

that some research insight and knowledge cannot be fully transferred to verbal form. (p. 169)

Harper (1994) writes that photographs should not merely reinforce personal assumptions about people and places. Instead photographs can be used to understand the world of others. Becker (1974) suggests a photographer must become conscious of the theory that guides the taking of her photographs. The critical understanding both Harper and Becker emphasize is that ultimately photographs are both technically and socially constructed. Although photographs as representation appear to document something “real” or “true” that was in front of the camera, they in fact capture what may be more important--the cultural context that underpins the captured image. Understanding that photographs are both technically and socially constructed became the guiding theory of this inquiry.

Furthermore, my work is influenced by Ulmer’s (1989) conception of *mystory* in which authors are encouraged to write from interpretation and memory, rearranging and inventing text and foregoing any claims on factual accuracy. Such research writing allows the researcher to search for an emotional truth (Blew, 1999; Denzin, 2008; Stegner, 1962). Through this search, a researcher can translate experience, memory, and fantasy into a fictional truth (Ketelle, 2004), which Blew notes can take an author into the “...boundaries of creative nonfiction [which] will always be as fluid as water” (p. 7). The idea of bending the boundaries of research using fiction is not a new concept in the social sciences. Clifford and Marcus (1986) suggested that all ethnographies are, in fact, constructed narratives: kinds of fictions. They use the term fiction not to claim that ethnographies are fictitious or opposed to the truth, but in order to emphasize that ethnographies cannot, and do not, report complete accounts of reality; ethnographies, like much research, only tell part of the story.

I began to consider how photographs are both technically and socially constructed and the role photography could play in shaping an inquiry. That led me to ask questions about photography. More specifically, I ask: How can photographs be used as narrative texts? How are photographic narrative texts shaped by the interaction of the (a) viewer with the image, (b) the negotiated construction of the image, and (c) the photographer’s intention?

Theoretical Framework

I approached this project on photo-elicitation through a narrative lens. I chose a narrative approach because Chase (2005) reminds us that narrative inquiry is a particular type of qualitative inquiry focused on retrospective meaning making which is central to photo-elicitation. Further, narrative inquiry was a desirable lens because it allowed me to tell the story of this project from beginning to end. Stories, as a component of narrative inquiry, can teach, represent, identify, explain, persuade, and reinforce social boundaries while communicating power structures – all of which make stories potentially important mechanisms for understanding why people choose to do the things that they do. I want to explain the story of this project to provide a context for my research just as much as I want to present the research itself. For me, the story and the research provide a holistic narration of my goals, both the process and the product. Narrative inquiry stems from a

post modern paradigm through which human interaction is recognized as context dependent. In this regard, narrative inquiry also mirrors my research since my photographs are: (a) context dependent; (b) rely on the retrospective meaning making of their subjects; and (c) tell a story.

Narrative inquiry helps researchers make meaning out of lived experience. In her work, Chase (2005) outlines five lenses through which modern narrative inquiry is approached. Chase writes that narrative researchers:

- a) treat narrative as a distinct form of discourse, as a “way of understanding one’s own and others’ actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time” (p. 656)
- b) view narrative as verbal action, as a way of doing something
- c) view stories as “enabled and constrained by a range of social resources and circumstances” (p. 657)
- d) view narrative stories as “socially situated interactive performances” (p. 657)
- e) understand “*themselves* as narrators as they develop interpretations and find ways in which to present or publish their ideas about the narratives they studied” (p. 567)

Chases’ framing of narrative provides a foundation for the evolving field of narrative inquiry, and, as such, provide researchers like myself a breadth of opportunity for narrative exploration.

Clandinin and Connelly (1990) help us understand that narratives focus on and characterize the phenomena of human experience. In a narrative, the story and the voice of the researcher rest at the center of the work. Bruner (2002) reminds us that narrative as a distinct form of understanding “...gives shape to things in the real world and often bestows on them a title to reality” (p. 8). Words are all we have to narrate our lives (Ellis & Bochner, 1992). Narrative inquiry is, therefore, the collecting of *narration* through storytelling. Narrative inquiry affords the opportunity to reexamine the relationship between the observer and observed (Krieger, 1991; Richardson, 1992). In order to orient fully towards narrative stories, we have to be willing to place ourselves in the context of the story in order to deconstruct and interpret it (Arendt, 1958; Kerby, 1991). In this way we accept *ourselves* as storied beings (Bruner; Ketelle, 2008; McAdams, 1993). Narrative inquiry calls on us as authors to reveal either a personal story (Behar, 1996) or the reconstructed stories of others (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). The complexity of narrative lies in its subjective focus on human self-making (Bruner) and its implications for understanding the connections between self and story.

This approach can be deeply personal, and yet the stories are also shaped by more global social, cultural, and historical contexts within which they are constructed, understood, and shared. Narratives implicitly communicate group values and social cultural norms. Narratives have the power to define boundaries based on gender, race, and class. Narratives convey and reinforce power structures and sense of group membership, and in so doing have the power to include and exclude (Hall, 1984, 1997).

In conducting narrative inquiry an author is invited into new ways of writing scholarship that allows for the imaginative exploration of ideas. Richardson (1994) describes this kind of writing as a search for meaning:

I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I didn't know before I wrote it. I was taught, however, as perhaps you were, too, not to write until I knew what I wanted to say, until my points were organized and outlined. No surprise, this static writing model coheres with mechanistic scientism and quantitative research...The model has serious problems: It ignores the role of writing as a dynamic, creative process; it undermines the confidence of beginning qualitative researchers because their experience of research is inconsistent with the writing model; and it contributes to the flotilla of qualitative writing that is simply not interesting to read because adherence to the model requires writers to silence their own voices and to view themselves as contaminants. (p. 517)

Richardson (1994) helps us understand that in social science research, narrative inquiry can provide ways of exploring and writing research that push beyond the traditional orthodoxies of academic writing in the social sciences. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) note that writers interpret as they write, thus making the act of writing a form of inquiry and a way of making sense in the world. Both Richardson and St. Pierre advocate for the exploration of new narrative literary styles in social science writing calling these different forms of writing CAP (Creative Analytical Processes) ethnography. Ellis and Bochner (1996) regard CAP ethnographies as heralding a paradigm shift in social science research. My work on photo-elicitation is a representation of both narrative inquiry and CAP processes.

Literature Review

The public realism of the photographic image is fundamentally grounded in a belief that photographs are reproductions of reality. However, Benjamin (1983) reminds us that the power of the photograph combines a simultaneous claim on the truth and the need for a story to give the photograph meaning. Benjamin (1969) also reminds us that to represent the past does not mean we must recognize it the way it really was. It means to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (p. 257).

In writing on photography, Barthes (1981) uncovers his attempt to find the essence of photography, but in the end he could only write about response – how the photograph made him feel. In analyzing photography Barthes explores three practices involved in creating the final product. These practices involve the Operator or the Photographer (to do); the Spectator (to look); and the Object (to undergo). Barthes takes pleasure in the knowledge that he can look at an image of something that actually happened. Do all photographs, as Barthes insists they should, actually happen in front of the lens? There is always the possibility of staging or even trick photography.

Spencer and Martin (as quoted in Grover, 1990) encourage us to “view photographs, not as fixed objects with singular meanings but as a ‘toolshed’ of images

that can be taken out, rearranged, and recontextualized to suit one's current life purpose" (p. 17). This is what artist Clarrisa Sligh does when she writes on and over her family photographs, reading the photographs against current times and dominant culture. In describing her constructed art pieces, *What's Happening with Momma?* and *Reading Dick and Jane with Me*, Sligh explains, "Each time I was trying to get a clear picture of what I had experienced, of what my particular family was like versus 'the family' in quotes" (Marks, 1989, p. 6). hooks (1994) describes her family photo albums as places where new stories can and should be told.

Pink (2002) further elaborates on the role of photography and narrative, linking the importance of the visual content with written text even more firmly. She outlines the possibilities of using visual content as part of a qualitative paradigm. The visual content which Pink envisions being part of a larger qualitative paradigm includes photo-elicitation. To support her assertion that visual content may contribute to a richer qualitative paradigm, Pink draws from research in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, photo studies, and media studies.

Brief history of photo-elicitation in research

Anthropologists have a longstanding use of photographic images in their work. Gesell (1945) and Gesell and Ilg (1934), for example, did research based on photographic records of children taken day-by-day and at scheduled intervals over many years. From this work Gesell created timetables of normal maturation and social development. Bateson and Mead (1942) did a photographic research project that resulted in the publication of *The Balinese Character*. Although completed in 1942, the importance of this pioneering work remains relevant today because of its use of visual and written texts. Bateson and Mead explicitly found words inadequate for their study and used text and images to inform their findings:

We are attempting a new method of stating the intangible relationships among different types of culturally standardized behavior by placing side by side mutually relevant photographs...By the use of photographs, the wholeness of each piece of behavior can be preserved, while the special cross-referencing desired can be obtained by placing the series of photographs on the same page. (p. xii)

Beyond this initial study, both Bateson and Mead (1942) continued to use photography in their work as a means to both document and prompt response from those whom they were studying. The application of Bateson and Mead's use of visual and written text now extends well beyond the field of anthropology and is found in social science research more broadly. In sociology for example, Hall (1959) expanded on Bateson and Mead's method of integrating visual and written texts when he explained the importance of photography in the development of his concepts of non-verbal communication. Birdwhistell (1952, 1970) used photography and film to systematize the study of culturally patterned posture and gesture, and Worth and Adair (1972) used 16mm film as a means to gain an inside view of the manner in which Navajos structure

their visual world. In this regard, photo-elicitation is an important methodology that is an outgrowth of this earlier research.

Photo-elicitation as a methodology

Traditionally, photo-elicitation includes photos in conjunction with interviews to guide the research process. This methodology is generally associated with Collier and Collier (1986). Heisley (2001), however, argues that using visual methods can be independent and need not be considered extra add-ons to research. In fact, it can be the central part of research methodology. From a theoretical perspective, a photograph can both reflect and develop theory in several ways. Pinney (1992) argues that to some “photography appears as the final culmination of a Western quest for visibility and scrutiny” (p. 74). Rather than presenting a unitary deterministic picture of “reality” or “the truth,” Pinney proposes that a photograph presents a researcher with multiple ways of knowing. Photo-elicitation discards any pretence of objectivity and recognizes that the photograph has the power to elicit interpretations from individuals. Pinney further argues that the photograph’s artistic qualities and reinterpretation can open up new ways of understanding and interpreting a single image. In this way, photo-elicitation method potentially supports narrative inquiry and critical explorations (Anderson, 2002; Smith, 1998). Photos as visual texts can be equally relevant to hermeneutic and critical analysis as written text (Emmison & Smith, 2000). Research, after all, attempts to assist in the forming of images through words, numbers, charts, graphs, quotations and more.

Emergent Project Design

This project emerged over a period of two years. It did not, in fact, start as a research project, but evolved into one as the relationship between the artistic content of the photographs and the potential use of photographs as a research tool emerged in the interpretations my colleagues, students, and others brought to the photographs. I became interested in taking photographs after seeing Jim Goldberg’s (1995, 2007) work, and as I described earlier, in the beginning I just wanted to learn how to take a good photograph. Slowly, I realized that I could use photography: (a) to explore my work teaching educational leadership students, and (b) to explore my students’ development and our relationships. I began by taking photographs of eight principals who were my students. Each agreed to have his/her photograph taken and later to participate in this project. I selected my photographic subjects because they were all students with whom I worked closely. All the photographs were taken in urban school settings, and I allowed the principals to select where they were photographed, an important protocol in this research and a reminder of Barthes’ (1981) assertion that all photographs are socially constructed. Below is the conceptual framework of Barthes’ interpretation and how I extended his conception to narrative inquiry. In order to explore the application of Barthes’ interpretation of photography through narrative inquiry I realized my photography project would be an applicable vehicle.

Barthes’ (1981) conceptual framework for photography as an artistic endeavor is stated below:

Photographer
or Operator
“To Do”

Object
“To Undergo”

Spectator
“To Look”

Barthes’ (1981) conceptual framework for photography as I applied it to my narrative research:

Researcher
“To Ask”

Subject
“To Reflect”

Spectator
“To Transform”

In this conceptual framework, all involved make meaning of the photographic process. The photograph was constructed between the researcher and the subject. Once the photograph was constructed, it invited those who participate in its construction, as well as others, to consider new ways in which it may be used.

The steps of the project were emergent and can be understood through the steps outlined in the chart below:

Table 1

Emergent research action steps

| | Action Step |
|--------|---|
| Step 1 | I began taking photographs for fun and learned about Jim Goldberg’s work. |
| Step 2 | I decided to take pictures of my students to practice with the camera. |
| Step 3 | I realized the photographs I took had both visually and socially constructed meanings and I decided to study this idea in a more structured way. |
| Step 4 | My students responded to a photograph of themselves answering the question, “What does being a principal mean to me?” |
| Step 5 | I kept a journal and made notes based on the responses students wrote. My writing focused on not only the photographs and responses, but also my experience and relationship with each student. |
| Step 6 | I wrote a narrative to accompany each photograph. My narrative is an exploration of my relationship with each student and an interpretation of his/her photograph and response. |

Description of emergent steps

As I collected photographs of my students, I found that I wanted to share the photos with others. I initially shared the collection with my colleagues and other students to gain their perspectives and understand in what ways they thought the photographs could be interpreted as visual texts. Further, I was curious what the subjects of the photographs would see in their own images. Would they see what I saw? Would they see what my colleagues and other students saw? I wanted to learn what the photographs would elicit from them. Recalling Goldberg's (1995, 2007) work, I realized that I could capture the principals' thoughts with their visual portraits if they wrote on their photographs. I asked them to write below their photograph an answer to the question: "What does being a principal mean to me?" Their responses became a free association to the image. They wrote about what they saw in the image and how it related to their understanding of the work. By asking the principals to write in response to their portraits, I had data sources that consisted of the photographs I took of the principals at their school sites and their written responses to my research question. The portraits thus became visual and written texts.

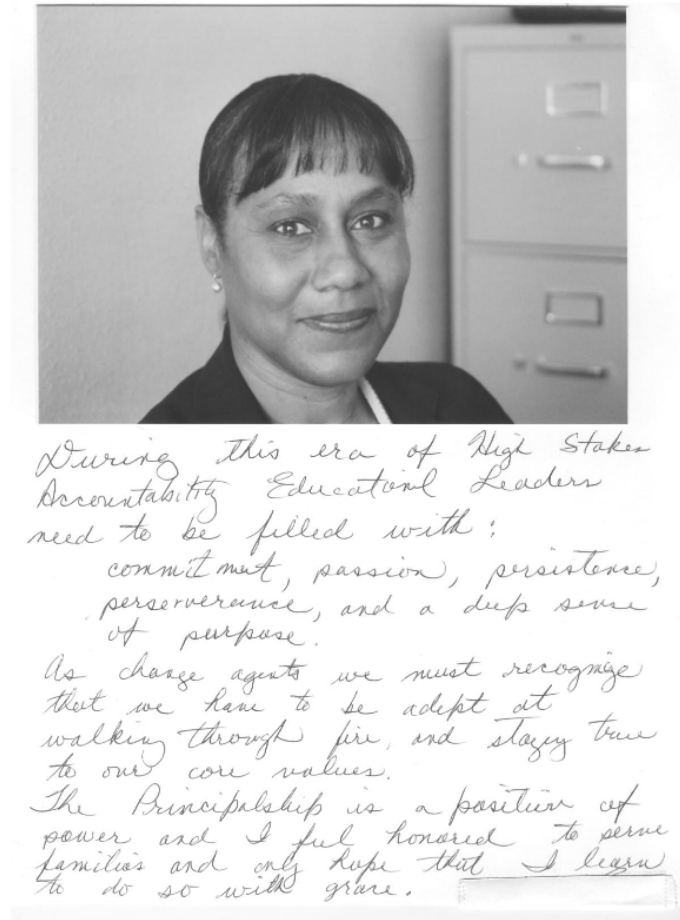
The portraits as visual and written texts spurred me to think more deeply about the photographs being a part of my narrative research. I wanted to analyze the photographic images as texts and as reflections of my students as well as reflections of my own feelings about my students and our work as educators. To do this, I placed myself in multiple roles of interpreter, allowing me to explore both subjectivities (human wants, needs, and desires) and identities (human self-making). I *read* the image that the photograph presented to me and wrote in a journal about what I *saw*. What do I see in this image? How is that shaped by what I know about the principal, and our relationship as teacher and student? In other words, what was *in* the photograph and what was *in* my relationship with the student?

Next, I read the reflection the school principal had written. I made notes about how each principal's reflection on his/her role as principal was congruent or not with my knowledge of each as a school leader, and how both related to the image at hand. After reading through these notes several times, I endeavored to integrate both of those interpretations with my relationship with the principal. In doing this, I once again intentionally placed myself in this inquiry in order to make new meaning. At the same time as I was working with the photographs and the principal's responses to the photos, I received an expedited review from the Intuitional Review Board for my study.

I would like to acknowledge the limitations of the methodology of this effort: emergent project design, small sample size, and interpretations of photographs and feeling that are measured in general factors. The value of this paper may not reside so much in any substantive findings as in its heuristic value in contributing to an exploration of visual methods in social science research. The findings of this study do contribute to advancing qualitative methods and can encourage other work that does the same.

Snapshots

What follows are eight narrative images created through photographic images, the written reflections of those in the portraits, and my own responses to the photographs and the subjects' interpretations of their portraits.



Debbie

Debbie looks straight into the camera with a restrained smile. Her eyes sparkle and seem to tell us everything we need to know about her character – her spirit. She is steady, stern, but soft. As she looks into the camera I feel sure of her sense of humor, and she is someone I would like to talk to, but I know she is not going to take any nonsense. She writes that principals need to be filled with “commitment, passion, persistence, perseverance and a deep sense of purpose.” She also says that principals have to be adept at “walking through fire” which stands in contrast to her calm, gentle image, although the challenge of her eyes tell us that she knows how to make things happen.

She stands up and takes me on a tour of her school. She is careful to pick up trash on the sidewalk as we walk along. We walk in and out of classrooms as she greets everyone she encounters. I can tell she is cared for by the way people interact with her. We come out to the playground and a group of sixth grade boys are assembled. She walks

over to them and begins talking to them about their day and what they are doing. I think to myself, "This is what it takes." We are in constant movement, never standing in one place, always on our way to the next point. This work takes stamina.

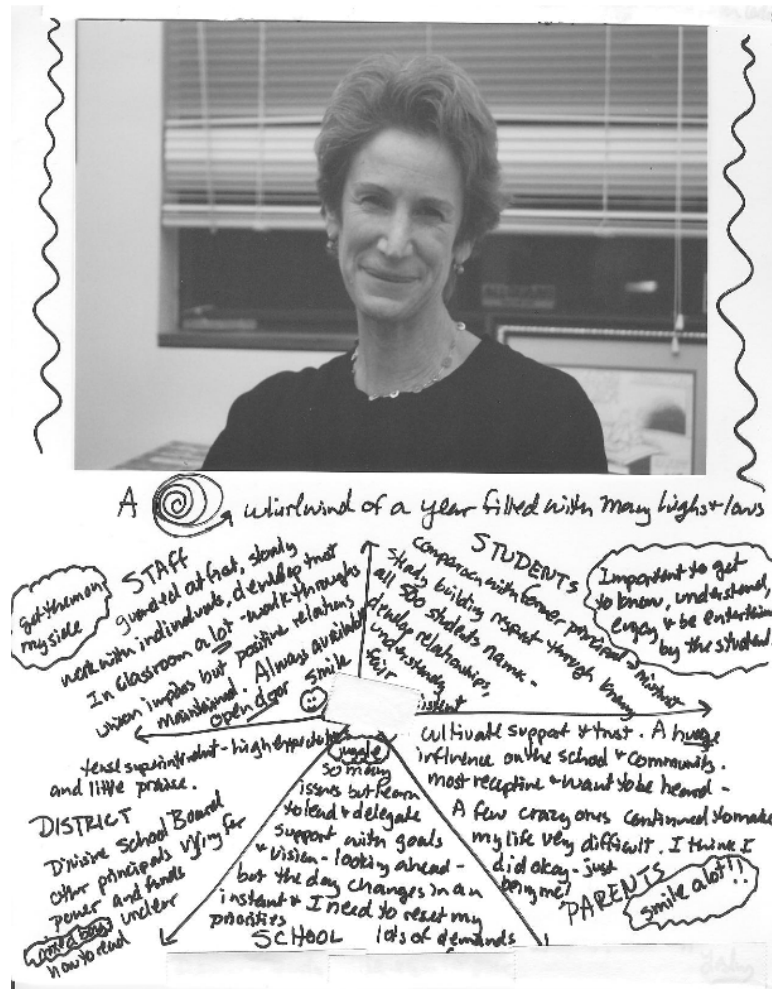
Hugo

He stands in front of his store front charter school that sits smack dab in the middle of Oakland. A study of the image reminds me that his school could just as easily be a doctor's office or a Long's Drug store. His hands are held behind his back, and he's smiling with his mouth closed. The way he's standing is steady, a person to be counted on. Looking at the image I have a sense that nothing can rock him. He will handle things as they come up. His physical stance says, "I'll show up everyday, and I'll do it for the kids." The mystery of Hugo is his kindness which is conveyed no matter how he stands or sits or holds his hands. He writes, "To be a principal is to be inspired by your team: students, parents, teachers, staff." He goes on to explain that it is through this inspiration that the energy that is needed to do the work and put in the long hours is derived.

I look longer at Hugo and imagine the talks I've had with him. "How can I tell her she isn't doing a good job?" he would ask. Talking to Hugo about his work is like traversing a reflective plain that is seldom crossed. He conveys lessons learned while considering next steps. He tells me we need to walk around the school, and we move. His tour involved a great deal of narration: This is the math teacher who also plays the trombone, and this is the English teacher who is running a marathon this weekend. Hugo knows important things about everyone around him. I imagine the teachers and students can't resist sharing themselves with him. He keeps people safe.



TO BE A PRINCIPAL IS TO BE INSPIRED
BY YOUR TEAM; STUDENTS, PARENTS, TEACHERS,
STAFF. ONE HAS TO CARE FOR THEM ENOUGH
TO PUT THE LONG HOURS TO BUILD BRIDGES
BETWEEN THEM AND TO THE FUTURE.



Lesley

She looks into the camera with a closed smile. Lesley conveys a powerful friendliness. Through the camera she is trying to connect to people – to her the job is about people. She writes everywhere she can on the picture starting with, “A whirlwind of a year filled with many highs and lows.” She goes on to divide the lower part of the page in four parts: “get them on my side,” “students,” “District,” “Juggle and smile a lot.” In the middle she emphasizes, “So many issues, but learn to lead and delegate support with goals and vision – looking ahead – but the day changes in an instant and I’ll need to reset my priorities.” Her image of strength and calm can convince us these are not just words.

Lesley had tried to get a principalship for some time before she landed this job and now she knows why it took some time – this is a perfect fit. When I visit her I am always prepared to wait because she is always with people. Once she’s free she says, “Come with me, I have something to show you,” and off we go. Sometimes she takes me to the library and other times to classrooms. She wants me to see her school through her eyes and although that isn’t entirely possible, I try.



Leading this school is kind of like walking through a busy marketplace while wearing an invisibility cloak. I keep on bumping into people - making them stop and think for a second, changing their paths, reorienting their positions - but for the most part, they don't really know that I am there, (unless they trip over me and fall flat on their faces!).

Often, I feel like the job is much bigger than me - it's awesome, it's unyielding. So, I consider what Spiderman's uncle said to him. "With great power comes great responsibility." So - I stop and I consider how blessed I am because what I am doing here makes a difference to children. It matters. And that is very powerful!

Mark

He is standing with a life size doll of Spiderman which is in his office. He is dressed in an argyle sweater vest that makes him look about 12 years old. The image would bring a smile to the face of anyone with a heartbeat. Standing next to Spiderman conveys his sense of humor. He begins by writing, "Leading this school is kind of like walking through a busy marketplace while wearing an invisibility cloak. I keep bumping into people - making them stop and think for a second, changing their paths, reorienting their positions - but for the most part, they don't really know I'm there (unless they trip over me and fall flat on their faces!)." He goes on to express that the job is big and "unyielding." He notes that Spiderman's uncle told him that "with great power comes great responsibility" which helps him focus on how "blessed" he is to make a difference in lives of children.

When I visit Mark he comes out and greets me in a professional way, takes me into his office, closes the door and always begins a brief rant.

"I hate my job!"

"No you don't," I say.

Our talks go from there and are about reflecting and processing. His humor is one key to his success. Once he has talked about what's on his mind he usually will say, "Let's take a walk. Have I showed you the new playground?"

Lakimbre

She is standing in her office, staring at the camera, holding a walkie-talkie with a rain slicker on. The photo captures her for a moment, but we have an idea of what her life at school is like. Behind her is a box marked "Caught in the Act," and the wall is covered with diplomas and awards. Lakimbre is a person on the move who wants to talk to everyone on her way. Lakimbre attached a type-written essay to her image which begins, "Yes, I'm on a roller coaster, but I'm definitely enjoying the ride." Somehow this almost feels like a title for the image. She goes on to write that, "Every aspect of working in a school energizes me." She writes about how no two days are alike and how that is a fit for her – the ambiguity of the work isn't stressful. She ends with this sentence, "Shaping the culture, meeting with parents (we are finally allies), long hours, slight stress, lightening pace, educating adults, intense conversations, reaching kids, reflective practices, daily growth and constant fun – this is leadership to me!"

Lakimbre is loveable and addicted to high performance. Being in her range means I will laugh. Keeping up with her is the hard part. She says, "Walk with me to my car. I got a cake for the kids who were in a play last night and I want to take it to them. Come with me!" She walks fast up and down the halls greeting kids and adults.



Yes, I'm on a roller coaster, but I am definitely enjoying the ride.

Almost nine months ago, I was asked to comment on "How I see myself as a leader," or "What this role means to me?". It was a tough question to get to the core of. Perhaps, that is why it has taken me so long to respond. Each day my perceptions are being shifted, sometimes for better, other times for worse. These shifts occur by an overheard debate in the staff mailroom about class size, an interaction an disgruntled parent, witnessing that magical lesson where everything simply fell into place, a hug from a student at lunchtime, a small note of appreciation from someone who I didn't even think noticed.

During my time at Mills I was continually forced to be able to dissect a problem, frame it, and reframe it. I had to develop the skills to view situations through the lens of all the stakeholders. I am constantly asking myself? What do the parents want? The teachers? The office staff? The students?

When attempting to answer the question now of "what this position means to me?", I have to look over the past seven years at what about education and working in schools has stayed the same. For me, it's the work that inspires me. Every aspect of working in a school energizes me. When I started teaching I would often think, "I can't believe I'm getting paid to do this. Teaching is the perfect fit. Then I entered into administration. I had the support of all my colleagues. But I also carried self-doubt about my own ability to lead a staff and a school. Haunted by thoughts of, "Was I ready? Was I good enough, to not only to do work, but to do it well.

But a few months into the job I realized that this was my "new" fit. No two days are ever the same, so it never becomes routine. If asked to describe how I feel now, two words come to mind, grateful and lucky, to be so immersed in the work. On my best days I can say I was working with my teachers on lesson plans and strategies, pushing both them and me to become better each day. More often I'm walking, talking, collaborating, laughing, teaching, motivating, and unfortunately disciplining the students. Shaping the culture, meeting with parents (we are finally allies), long hours, slight stress, lightening pace, educating adults, intense conversations, reaching kids, reflective practices, daily growth, constant FUN. This is leadership to me!

Megan

Megan is smiling and looking directly into the camera. Her smile is sincere. Even with her friendly posture there is an element of restraint discernable in the image. The office where she's sitting has a wall covered in notices. She writes that being an assistant principal requires her to trust her instincts and act decisively, but calmly. She ends by writing, "I have also been reminded just how powerful basic human kindness (or the lack of it) influences a school climate."

Megan didn't think she was going to be an administrator, but taking it on had changed her. "I used to think getting something done should be easy. Now, I know the simplest thing can take such effort." One rainy day we find ourselves outside on the playground calling children in. She jokes with the children calling them by name. The lady in the blue sweater yells at the top of her lungs, "Who just yelled?" I whisper to Megan, "She did," and we both laugh.



Leadership as an Assistant Principal
at my school requires that I trust
my instincts and that I act decisively
and calmly. I have also been reminded
just how powerful basic human kindness (or the
lack of it) influences a school climate.



Leadership is constant, yet changes its form daily.

Jessica

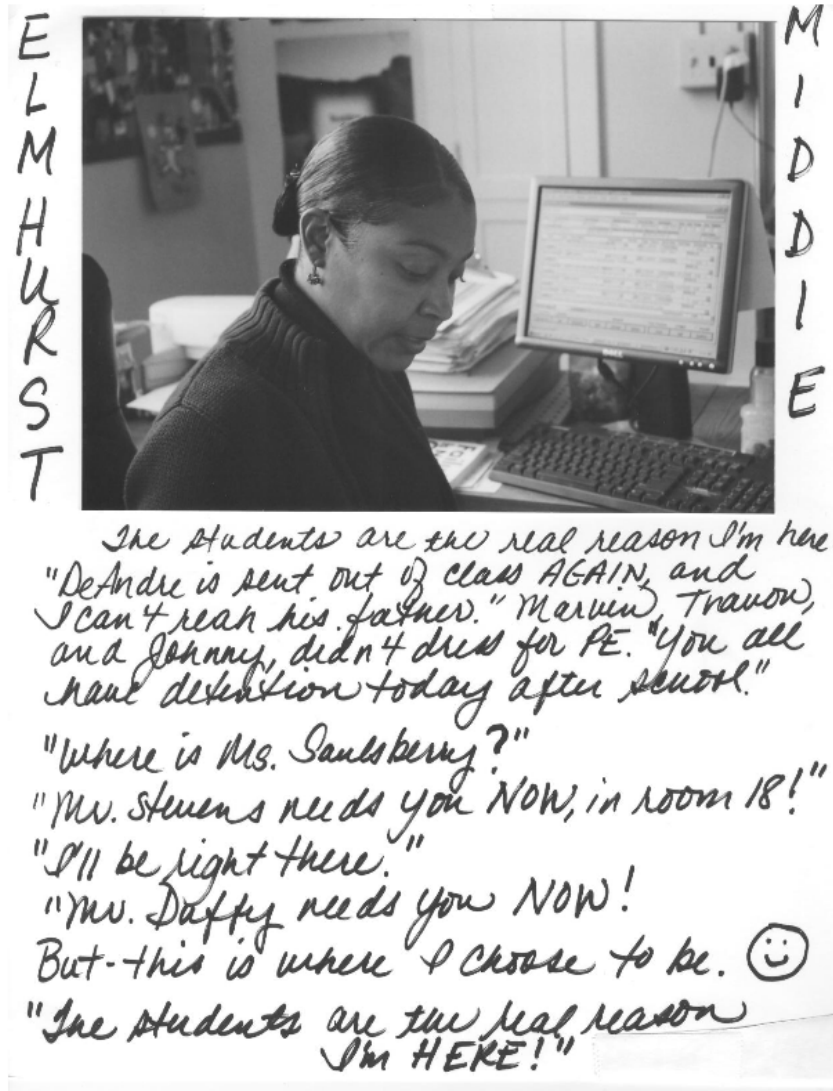
She is standing in a courtyard with benches behind her, a huge smile on her face and her frizzy natural curly hair going in every direction. She had been clear with me that she wanted the picture taken to focus on the professional suit she was wearing, but she didn't want her tennis shoes in the shot. For that reason the image cuts at the knees. Ordinarily she would have three or four walkie talkies on her waist, but she removed them for the photo. This is a fun person, someone you would like to get to know. Jessica projects a "can do" attitude in this image which matches what she wrote which simply says, "Leadership is constant, yet changes its form daily."

Carlos, a sophomore, comes up to Jessica and says, "Ms. B. what's the deal with global warming? Is it true?" Jessica smiles and has a talk with Carlos, who by all accounts hadn't spent much time in school this semester. Jessica roams the halls. In a school of 2,300 students it wouldn't seem possible to know all the kids, but it seems that she does. I hardly understand how this can be true. When I arrive Jessica says, "Walk with me and I'll tell you how things have been going." As we walk, she conveys familiar stories of behavior problems, teachers who aren't committed, problems with staff, and between each story she stops to talk to students or faculty. I think to myself, this work is done everyday, all day long.

Lucinda

In the image Lucinda is at her desk caught in mid-sentence. She's looking down, but a half second later the camera would have caught her looking up. Lucinda wasn't interested in having her picture taken and was determined to force me take an action shot. She is very serious in the image and in the process of "doing." She writes, "This is where I choose to be," and then she lists the kinds of things she hears all day long. "Deandre was sent out of class AGAIN and I can't reach his father...Where is Mrs.

Saulsberry?...Mr. Stevens needs you now in room 18...Travor and Johnny won't dress down for P.E...She ends by writing simply, "The students are the real reason I'm here!" Lucinda takes me into a room off the office to talk privately after a tour. A parent comes in speaking Spanish, and her child is with her. Lucinda speaks Spanish to the mother and turns to speak English to the child. I wonder why she's doing this, but I think she does it without realizing. Lucinda has ideas about how things should be done properly, but this time she seems to be moving with the flow although she's still fully in control.



Reflections on the snapshots

Each of these images represents a strong leader. The word *steady* comes to mind as I consider the set of images. Each of these leaders will show up through thick and thin. These are people on the go. They are people of action ready for anything. Traditional coding of the photographs and responses would have led me to some clear themes about the principalships of these eight school leaders: they are busy people; they are multi-tasking; they do not sit at desks; they have humor; and they have pride in their schools.

However, my aim in this paper is not to highlight the emergent themes that I could find, but rather the importance and value of this methodology for others as they approach their research.

Ultimately, this work advances inquiry focused on self and self in relation to others and it is based on analysis of visual and relational understandings. The use of photo-elicitation was important here in merging my desire to understand the world as defined by those I photographed in relation to understandings I have made. What resulted in this inquiry was the construction of narratives that go beyond the photograph to such themes as *this is what it means to me to know this person*.

Conclusion

The process of studying photographic images was more subtle and complex than I might have guessed before I began this project. My students' thoughts and feelings in combination with my own created an interpretation that in no way is meant to be definitive. Instead each reader will create yet a new meaning through the thoughts and feelings evoked.

I learned through this project that we need to ask ourselves questions about what we see, rather than over-analyze the objectivity of an image. Why and for whom was the photograph taken? What can an image tell us? How is the photograph presented? Questions such as these may provide a starting place to explore all photographs more fully and to move away from the idea that any photograph has to represent an objective *truth*.

This inquiry has also prompted me to think about what photographers and narrative researchers have in common. Both have to slow down in order to self-regulate when their concern is fixed on an issue. Both have to consider many factors and perspectives before making a decision in order to move forward. Both have to put things in focus. Maybe narrative researchers and photographers both need to have an eye for composition (which is used in different ways), a gentleness (which connects them to humanity), and an ability to capture the moment (which allows each to do his/her work). Those qualities are difficult to combine and also why both narrative inquiry and photography are such powerful and difficult art forms. Barthes' (1981) idea of the photographer having three roles: Operator (to do); Spectator (to look); and Object (to undergo), also applies to narrative researchers who need to orient in these ways toward their work and their involvement in it.

Photo-elicitation can be understood as text and as such is a method being used today (Harper, 2002). Using photographs has been shown to be valuable in the social sciences, but Harper (2005) notes that there is a tension between the desire to photograph the social world and Institutional Review Boards with regard to informed consent and subject anonymity. Taking pictures of public life is viewed by some as highly problematic. When participants consent, in my view their consent should be considered carefully by review boards. There will be, no doubt, a continued tension between social science researchers who want to use photography in their work and Institutional Review Boards. These tensions have caused some social science researchers involved with visual methods to identify with photojournalists or even documentary photographers. Nonetheless, Becker's (1974) suggestion many years ago, that documentary

photographers and sociologists with an interest in photography should explore their overlap has gone under realized.

Further, Harper (2005) points to a second problem regarding loss of confidentiality in photos that portray people clearly in a field that structures research on anonymity. Again, there is a need to make distinctions between those who are willing participants who sign releases to that effect and public photography of unidentified individuals.

As narrative research continues to develop, it will be important for researchers like me to stay connected to social science research and make every effort for our work to be accessible and understandable to our colleagues. Although some narrative work may be experimental, and we need experiments, it is also important to understand how narrative work connects to social science research traditions that are grounded in ethnographic life history (e.g., Chase, 2005) so we can help our students and colleagues better understand where our work fits and what can be learned from it.

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