Cultivating reflexive research practice when using participants' photographs as research data

Carly Guest

Abstract

This chapter reflects on a study exploring the development of a feminist consciousness. During the interviews participants were invited to share photographs that were significant to their feminist becoming. Various ethical and methodological challenges arose through the use of visual data, in particular the ethics of the interpretation and dissemination of participants' personal photographs. Both issues were highlighted and addressed through reflexive research practice, which exposed how the researcher's reaction to and feelings about the photographs impacted upon how they were interpreted and shared. Reflexivity demands that researchers interrogate their research choices and is essential for ethical and rigorous research. This chapter argues that visual methods, whilst posing new ethical challenges, can enhance the reflexive research practice necessary for responding to and navigating its challenges.

Introduction

Researchers across disciplines are increasingly using visual methods to explore multiple layers of experience (Brookfield et al., 2008; Del Busso, 2011; Silver and Reavey, 2010). In this chapter I consider some methodological and ethical challenges that arise from the use of photographs as data, drawing on two examples from my research into women's narratives of becoming feminist. This work, which involved blending photo-elicitation methods and narrative interviewing, was influenced by the developing tradition within social research for using creative research methodologies as a means of exploring experience. I argue that visual methods, specifically the use of personal photographs, offers opportunities for and demands

reflexivity in order to navigate the challenges that unfold across the research process. As research data, photographs can have multiple layers of meaning for both the researcher and participant. To understand how and why these layers are brought more or less into view we must reflect on our own response to the images and to consider the factors that shape our interpretation of them.

I discuss photographs shared by two participants that I refer to as Rebecca and Alice. Rebecca's photograph prompted questions about the process of interpretation and the importance of reflexivity to ensure participants' stories are not overwhelmed by researchers' own stories. Alice's photograph highlighted the challenges of navigating political and ethical concerns when disseminating findings from visual research. Both of these examples highlight the power that researchers have in the ways that images are interpreted and shared, and the importance of engaging in reflexive work to interrogate how and why we make methodological and ethical decisions.

Methodology

The study involved interviewing feminist women aged between twenty and thirty-five. The interview approach was based on the Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (Wengraf, 2004), and was adapted to incorporate visual methods. The interviews were loosely structured in three parts. To begin the women were asked to tell their stories of 'becoming feminist'. I then asked questions based upon their account to draw out details of moments, people and places of importance. Finally, I invited the women to share photographs and explain why they were meaningful. These discussions drew out the participants' interpretation of the images and their significance to their story of becoming feminist.

Annette Kuhn's (1995) guidelines for visual analysis provided a framework for exploring the significance of the photographs with participants. Kuhn asks the viewer to

consider the feelings they associate with an image, to explore its content, context and means of production and its intended and actual audience. These steps are designed to generate associations to extend the analysis beyond a solely personal response, in order to position the photograph in cultural and historical contexts. Kuhn places photographs at the intersection of the personal and social, illustrating that even these very intimate objects are never wholly personal. The images participants that brought to the interviews ranged from childhood photographs, to images of people, places and events that were recently taken, and so spoke to the ongoing significance of past events in the women's present day personal and political identifications. Participants shared both personal photographs and publically available images and in doing so blurred these boundaries. Publically available, and often familiar images, acquired distinct and personal meanings for the women, whilst their personal photographs took on wider significance when discussed in relation to their feminist politics.

Visual methods

My use of visual methods was driven by an understanding that the processes of narrating, remembering and forgetting are central to human experience and the development of identity and subjectivity (Lawler, 2007; Plummer, 1994; Middleton and Brown, 2004). Therefore, the ways in which we select, recall and retell our experiences reveal something about processes of meaning-making and the construction of identities (Tamboukou, 2004; Plummer, 1994; Lawler, 2007; Squire, 2005). Visual methods can illuminate this by exploring how objects, such as photographs, mediate and provide some stability to our engagement with the past, offering a point of reference across the fluid and unstable processes of remembering (Middleton and Brown, 2005). The incorporation of photographs into social research recognises that they link us with the past and take on new and shifting meaning when being viewed in the present.

Kuhn's (1995) work was instrumental in convincing me to take the visual seriously when researching the relationships and emotional entanglements active in the development of personal and political identifications. In her 'revisionist autobiography' *Family Secrets* (1995) – a term that signals a critique of autobiography as an individualistic endeavour – Kuhn uses written and visual narrative to explore the relationship between memory and identity. She views the production, content, reception and organization of photographs as a form of narrative expression; photographs, and our readings of them, tell personal, social and cultural stories. Our response to photographs reveals the ways in which we might wish to reorder, retell or 'repair' the past in the present and in this way they negotiate the relationship between past and present. The incorporation of photographs into social research, therefore, acknowledges their significance to the construction of identity and attends to the multiple ways in which narratives and memories are formed and expressed.

In bringing their personal photographs to the interview – ones that have a meaning beyond their story of becoming feminist – the women 'reorder' the stories that these photographs have previously told and bring them to the centre of their feminist becoming. Photographs that might not have explicit or self-explanatory feminist content are displayed in the interview setting to form part of a narrative of becoming feminist. An example of this was the way in which all of the women discussed their mothers and most shared a photograph of them. In the context of the interview these family photographs told feminist stories, yet displayed or discussed elsewhere they might take on different meanings altogether. These maternal images also operate at the intersection between the personal and social, because whilst deeply personal feelings are attached to them, they take on a collective significance for understanding feminist story-telling when considered together. It is by no means a coincidence that so many of the women shared images of their mothers to discuss a topic that is so often articulated in generational and familial terms.

This reordering and recasting of past events with new and shifting meaning in the present occurs in any narrative account, but photographs can illustrate this process in a very material way. For example, during the interviews different women sorted and discussed their photographs chronologically, thematically, or affectively. The ways in which the women arranged and handled the images during the interview formed part of the construction of their narrative. The incorporation of photographs into the research method therefore offers possibilities for exploring the layers of meaning an image and its context of display can provoke. Whilst photographs can offer a fascinating means of exploring how identities are configured as we interpret and reinterpret past experiences, they also present methodological and ethical challenges precisely because of the shifting and varied meanings they have the capacity to convey. As researchers, our interpretation of visual data must include consideration of the meaning of the photograph for the participant and how this is shaped by the research context, but also take into account how our own responses to the image shape this interpretation and decisions made about dissemination. Reflexive research practice is essential for managing these different analytic considerations.

Reflexive research practice

Reflexive research practices illuminate the ways in which the researcher's positioning shapes the research process at every stage. For me, this is an approach that recognises that all research is auto/biographical. This is not just in the sense that as researchers we might pursue topics influenced by our own lives, but that our reading of others' accounts is inevitably filtered through our own experiences (Cotteril and Letherby, 1993). As Pamela Cotteril and Gayle Letherby note:

> We draw on our own experiences to help us understand those of our respondents. Thus their lives are filtered through us and the filtered stories of our lives are present (whether we admit it or not) in our written accounts (Cotteril and Letherby, 1993: 74)

Cotteril and Letherby suggest that the stories we tell about our participants' lives are always understood through the prism of our own stories. Narratives are formed collectively as we draw upon other personal, social and cultural accounts in the construction of our own. Researchers are as much implicated in these processes as anyone else. This does not mean that researchers cannot make knowledge claims – we bring methods and theories to generate and interpret data, and have the vantage point of aggregating personal accounts to discern social and cultural patterns. However, reflexivity should form an essential part of the process of making these claims to highlight how the factors that shape the research process are productive of the conclusion drawn.

Various thinkers have contributed to the epistemological debates that challenge the boundaries between objectivity and subjectivity (Bourdieu, 1990; Letherby, 2014; Rowan and Reason, 1981). Reflexivity is an essential aspect of any position that posits that, whilst there might be such a thing as a material reality, the exploration of it can never be considered neutral. These conversations are much more detailed and nuanced than I have space to develop upon here, but one articulation that I find useful is Letherby's (2014) discussion of 'theorized subjectivity'. Letherby acknowledges that researching, writing and theorising are political endeavours and that drawing attention to and exposing the processes of each is part of ensuring both methodological rigour and ethical practice. Reflexive research should not seek to isolate or eradicate the influence of our auto/biography, even if this were possible, but to draw attention to the ways in which the research process is shaped and formed by it. In adopting this perspective we are able to consider the significance of processes of knowledge production, that is, being explicit about how the decisions we make about research design,

data selection, interpretation, and so on, impacts upon the conclusions we draw. It also acknowledges that the auto/biographical position we work from shapes these decisions.

I am a feminist woman and so in researching how women 'become feminist' my own investment in the topic is evident in many ways. While I anticipated that I would identify with many aspects of participants' experiences, there was always a risk of colonising the accounts by reading them from my own white, middle-class perspective. Indeed critical work on the production of feminist histories illustrates that this positioning makes certain (problematic) narratives of feminist history, such as generational inheritance, available and knowable to me in ways that might be different for other women (Henry, 2004). This is a risk in any research process and it is for this reason that reflexive research practice is so crucial. In asking questions about our own positioning as researchers we can consider how this shapes our research. Crucially, it can alert us to points where our own interpretation might overwhelm the voices of our participants. It is the blurring of these boundaries that requires reflection. I do this not to separate my own experiences from my interpretation, but to acknowledge and understand the role my feminist story had in the retelling of others' stories. This goes some way to acknowledging the power dynamics that are at play when, as researchers, we have control of the interpretation of participants' stories.

Whilst reflexivity is critical for all research methods, I found that my participants' photographs often drew my attention in very immediate ways to how my own personal perspectives and experiences were shaping my engagement with their accounts. My responses to these photographs repeatedly reminded me of the necessity of reflexivity for ensuring ethical and rigorous research practice. I turn now to Rebecca and Alice's photographs to illustrate the function of reflexive research practice for exposing the factors that influence our research decisions. Firstly, in my discussion of Rebecca's photograph I consider how reflexivity helped me negotiate the shifting and multi-layered stories that

photographs can tell and explore the processes and ethics of interpretation. Secondly, I consider the ethical issues that arose when Alice's motivation for sharing two photographs conflicted with my own concern for her wellbeing. Both these issues became apparent through the women's photographs and my response to them. I have chosen to discuss Rebecca and Alice's photographs here because they each exemplify in vivid ways how paying attention to our immediate and affective responses to participants'' accounts can bring our preconceptions, assumptions or discomfort about a research topic and the processes of interpretation and dissemination into view.

Rebecca's photograph

Like many of the participants, Rebecca's story of becoming feminist had a strong familial and, in particular, maternal narrative. Her parents were politically active and the images and sounds of the political landscape of 1980s Britain featured heavily in memories of her childhood. In particular, Rebecca recalled the 1984-85 UK miners' strikes and marches organised by the UK's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. During the interview Rebecca shared photographs, songs and stories from this period. Rebecca's mother was the protagonist in these stories, her prominence strongly suggested that Rebecca's own political activism was inspired by her example.

Rebecca's mother died when Rebecca was just ten. I read Rebecca's affection for the sights, sounds and socialist oppositional politics of the 1980s as placing her in time with her mother. This familial and maternal narrative of becoming feminist was, in part, reproduced and retold through images Rebecca brought to the interview, one of which was of her mother. In the photograph Rebecca's mother is alone, dressed casually in jeans and jumper, with no make-up, smiling as she leans against a dry stonewall. The photograph was taken in the early 1980s. Explaining its significance, Rebecca said:

> We never got to know each other as, you know, as you do as a teenage girl with your
> mum, or as a young woman, and also because I look like her, but, I have the same kind of
> mannerisms as her and that reminds me of me.

Rebecca recognises herself in the photograph and maintains a relationship with her mother through it. Her extended discussion of her mother emphasised the embodied markers by which, as a child, Rebecca 'knew' her mother was a feminist. These included wearing casual clothes and no make-up and other aspects that might be considered antithetical to the stereotypical markers of femininity. In recognising herself in this photograph, Rebecca perhaps also saw herself as feminist. Rebecca's narrative of becoming feminist is embedded in the politics of her childhood and in particular the association of political activism with her mother. I read her feminist identity as one that offered her a means of identifying with and staying close to her mother.

My own reaction to this photograph when I saw it during the interview illustrated how, as researchers, we interpret and shape participants' stories through our own experiences. When I first saw Rebecca's photograph I noted her mother's striking similarity to my own feminist aunt. In my viewing, I recognised the photograph, and the female, familial, feminist history it speaks to, as my own. My initial reading of Rebecca's photograph highlighted the importance of reflexive research practice. It indicated how I might expect Rebecca to read the image herself and how my interpretation of her account was intertwined with my own feminist story. Cox et al (2014) refer to the "fuzzy boundaries" between researcher and participant that can be associated with visual methods. Whilst they consider in particular the blurring of roles when both researcher and participant are invested in the *creation* of visual products, the interpretation of the visual in my research exposed 'fuzzy boundaries' between our stories. The immediacy of my affective response to the photograph brought this fuzziness

to light in a very visceral way. It was in this moment of viewing that my investments in and preconceptions of the topic were revealed.

The incorporation of personal photographs into social research has the potential to venture into what Boydell et al (2012: 10) term 'dangerous emotional terrain'. They suggest that artistic modes of representation have an 'emotional proximity and persuasiveness' (11) that can unsettle and trouble participants. Visual methods offered a form of data that, because of its emotional intensity, was likely to provoke reactions in both Rebecca and myself. In this instance my affective response to Rebecca's image – the feeling that it was *my* family photograph – alerted me to the influence of my own experiences on my interpretation. It prompted me to consider whether I was placing the familial and, in particular the maternal, at the centre of her feminist becoming because of the ways in which her images echoed in my own memories. This pushed me to question and challenge the focus of my analysis, and produced a more rigorous and justifiable interpretation.

Rebecca's photograph alerted me to the significance of my own feminist story in my interpretation of hers and drew attention to my investment in one of the stories the photograph told: that of a female, familial, feminist heritage. In this case the generational narrative that is given prominence in Rebecca's account, was partly due to my own identification with the narrative. In exposing the ways in which interpretation is situated and specific, reflexivity served to push the analysis forward. In this example, without denying the importance of the maternal in Rebecca's account, I was obliged to reconsider its complexities and the ways in which other aspects of her narrative disrupted its dominance. Reflexive practice was critical for avoiding telling a final and authoritative story about Rebecca's feminism and, rather, offering an interpretation that was formed by various personal, political, methodological and theoretical positions.

Alice's photograph

My second example is concerned with the importance and usefulness of reflexivity for thinking about the factors that influence the dissemination of participants' photographs. Assuming a participant has given consent for the photograph to be reproduced, decisions about dissemination might be based on the image's relevance to an analytical point. However, my response to some of Alice's photographs illustrated that, beyond this, there are other factors at play in this decision making process.

Alice brought a number of personal photographs to the interview that documented periods of gaining and losing weight and suggested relationships to her sexuality, femininity and feminism. She used these images to disrupt and challenge dominant ideals of feminine beauty and to tell a story of becoming feminist as something that helped her resist pressure to conform to these norms. Her discussion centred around two photographs. The first was an image of Alice standing in her underwear, with one foot on a chair as she adjusts her stocking. The photograph was taken by a professional photographer as part of a series that also featured a former girlfriend. The second image was taken some years later for an informal photoshoot with a friend. It was intended for a calendar that was never printed. It showed Alice, sitting on a bed, looking directly into the camera and smiling. She is naked in the photograph, although the viewer cannot see the detail of her body due to her pose and dark lighting. In the second image Alice has gained weight and her discussion of it suggested that she was using it to defy the coupling of slimness and attractiveness.

Guided by the work of Rose Wiles et al (2008), I offered participants different levels of consent for their photographs. These ranged from images being discussed but not reproduced, to being reproduced in full. Alice gave the highest level of consent for both these images, agreeing to them being reproduced in full in presentations and publications. In the context of her discussion of "fat positivity" (Cooper, 2010), Alice's consent for the

11

reproduction of the second image was driven by her feminist politics. However, despite Alice giving full consent for these photographs to be reproduced, I have felt uncertain and uncomfortable about doing so. In part, this unease reflects concerns that Alice might come to change her mind about sharing the images, and this is a concern that can be addressed by a staged consent process as suggested by Cox et al (2014). The intimacy of the images, however, meant that I was unsure about reproducing them even with contingent conditions for consent.

This conflict between Alice's consent and my own unease with the reproduction of her photographs raised questions about the reasons for this. When images are shared with wider audiences, participants might have little control over the context in which they are displayed or how they are interpreted. The generation, sharing and distribution of images can evoke unexpected emotional responses, perhaps particularly when the images depicted are intensely personal and intimate. I was concerned that Alice might feel exposed if the images were shared and so regret giving consent. I was also concerned that she would be subject to judgement by different viewers and audiences. This is despite at least one of the images originally being intended for publication as part of a calendar. This calendar was not published because of difficulties with printing, rather than reluctance from the subjects. There were, therefore, numerous indicators that Alice was willing and enthusiastic for the photograph to be published in some context.

Alice had explicitly political intent in bringing the images to the interview and giving permission for them to be shared. In wanting to take account of the possibility of Alice changing her mind about sharing the photograph, I was also undermining her reason for giving full consent—that is to challenge, question and disrupt popular and heteronormative notions of 'beauty'. To exclude the images when she had been so enthusiastic about their inclusion, could contribute to and imply the shaming of the fat female body that she was

12

resisting by sharing them. It also highlighted the power dynamics that were active in our relationship because, as the researcher, I had the power to make the final decision about how a photograph would be shared, within the parameters of the consent awarded by Alice. In the case of Alice's image, I draw on this power to undermine her own intention for the distribution of the image, albeit out of concern for Alice.

My reluctance to share the photographs highlighted a tension between an ethical obligation to protect participants, but also to offer them a platform to tell their stories. In Alice's case, to refuse to reproduce the photographs would deny her the opportunity to use her participation as a form of political action. Choosing not to reproduce the images in the context of a research project that is concerned with the development of a political consciousness, therefore, might seem contradictory. However, Alice's discussion of beauty norms and body image revealed that she was by no means immune to the social pressures to conform to beauty standards. Her resistance to these pressures was a daily struggle; she described an ongoing and transforming relationship to her body that, she acknowledged, required her to use various strategies to maintain a positive body image and challenge hegemonic notions of beauty. The sharing of these photographs might have been one such strategy, which perhaps made my reluctance to do so even more problematic. But it was a reluctance that was, in part, prompted by a sense, or assumption, of Alice's vulnerability in the face of societal pressures.

I was also aware of the different degrees of control that Alice and I had over how the research would be disseminated. As researchers we have the privilege of making decisions across time and dependant on context, in ways that are not always possible for participants. One possibility for managing this is to allow participants to reassert or withdraw consent at different stages and so acknowledge that their feelings about consent can change. However, as I discovered through Alice's photographs, it is difficult to always account for, or

adequately respond to, our *own* feelings about participants' images. The choices made about dissemination, therefore, go beyond the procedural issue of consent (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004) but take into account our feelings and concerns about dissemination, as well as what we might infer about our participants' sensitivities and vulnerabilities, even when they have given consent.

I chose not to reproduce the image here because it is not necessary for making an analytical point. I did decide to include the image in the thesis for which this research was carried out, but included with it a reflection on the reasoning for this. It felt more ethically problematic to not take seriously Alice's reasons for sharing the image and its importance to her story of becoming feminist, than to maintain an anonymity that she had not expressed a desire for. There are tensions between wanting to protect Alice and potentially undermining her autonomy and these cannot be erased and must be addressed through careful consideration given to the sharing of images in each particular instance. Where the photograph is important to the analysis, I foresee it being more appropriate to share it than not. However, it is likely that a level of discomfort or hesitancy in doing so will remain.

Incomplete resolutions

Visual methods can present distinct ethical challenges (Cox, 2014; Wiles, 2008). Many of these challenges unfold across the research process and cannot be contained or managed by formalised ethics procedures (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Likewise, there is no clear resolution to the kinds of challenges I have discussed in this chapter, but reflexive research practice does offer ways of exploring and navigating the issues that are raised (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Reflexivity is essential for addressing ethical issues that emerge in practice and visual methods can offer valuable opportunities for engaging in this important reflexive work. Reflexive research draws attention to our research choices; there are avenues of

interpretation that we might be more or less inclined to pursue, stories to which we pay more or less attention, and positions from which we approach and interpret data. It is vital that these are explored, illuminated and questioned as part of ethical and rigorous research.

Kuhn (1995) emphasises the importance of paying attention to our thoughts, feelings and responses to photographs as a means of understanding the stories they tell. In a research context, this can involve thinking carefully about how the photograph might be understood and experienced differently by researcher and participant. Kuhn offers an approach to working with visual data that is part of a tradition of auto/biographical and reflexive feminist research (Cotterill and Letherby, 1993; England, 1994; Letherby, 2012). Visual methods offer ample opportunity for engaging in this important reflexive work and illuminate the various dynamics that are active in the research process.

References

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Boydell, Katherine M., Tiziana Volpe, Susan Cox, Arlene Katz, Reilly Dow, Fern Brunger and Janet Parsons. 2012. "Ethical challenges in arts-based health research." *International Journal of the Creative Arts in Interprofessional Practice* 11.

Brookfield, Helen., Brown, Steven., and Paula Reavey. 2008. "Vicarious and Post-memory Practices in Adopting Families: The Re-production of the Past through Photography and Narrative." *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 18 (5): 474-491.

Cooper, Charlotte. 2010. "Fat Studies: Mapping the field," *Sociology Compass*, 4 (12): 1020-1034.

Cotterill, Pamela, and Gayle Letherby. 1993. "Weaving stories: Personal auto/biographies in feminist research." *Sociology* 27(1): 67-79.

Cox, Susan., Drew, Sarah., Guillemin, Marilys., Howell, Catherine., Warr, Deborah and Jenny Waycott. 2014. "Guidelines for Ethical Visual Research Methods." *Melbourne Social Equity Institute*. Accessed ht tp://vrc. org. au/guidelines-for-ethical-visualresearch-methods Sep. 2015.

Del Busso, Lilliana. 2011. "Using photographs to explore the embodiment of pleasure in everyday life." In *Visual methods in psychology: Using and interpreting images in qualitative research* edited by Paula Reavey, 43-54. London: Psychology Press.

England, Kim. 1994. "Getting personal: Reflexivity, positionality, and feminist research." *The Professional Geographer* 46 (1): 80-89.

Guillemin, Marilys and Lynn Gillam. 2004. "Ethics, Reflexivity, and 'Ethically Important Moments' in Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 10 (2): 261-280.

Henry, Astrid. 2004. *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third Wave Feminism*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.

Kuhn, Annette. 1995. *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*. London and New York: Verso.

Lawler, Steph. 2007. *Identity*. London: Polity.

Letherby, Gayle. 2012. "Theorised objectivity." In Objectivity and Subjectivity in Social Research. Gayle Letherby, John Scott, and Malcolm Williams, 79-102.London: Sage.

Middleton, David and Steve Brown. 2004. *The Social Psychology of Experience: Studies in Remembering and Forgetting*. London: Sage.

Plummer, Kenneth. 1994. *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*. London: Routledge.

Reason, Peter and Rowan, John (eds.). 1981. *Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research*. Chichester: John Wiley.

Silver, Joanna and Reavey, Paula. 2010. "He's a good-looking chap ain't he?': Narrative and Visualisations of Self in Body Dysmorphic Disorder." *Social Science and Medicine* 70 (10): 1641-1647.

Squire, Corinne. 2005. "Reading Narratives," *Group Analysis* 39 (1): 91-107.

Tamboukou, Maria. 2008. "Re-imagining the Narratable Subject." *Qualitative Research* 8(3) : 283-292.

Wengraf, Tom. 2004. "The Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) – Shortguide" NCRM Working Paper. http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/30/ accessed Sept. 2015.

Wiles, Rose., Prosser, Jon., Bagnoli, Anna., Clark, Andrew., Davies, Katherine., Holland, Sally and Emma Renold. 2008. "Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research," *ESRC National centre for Research Methods Review Paper*. Accessed at http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/421/ Sept. 2015.