Adding the agentic capacities of visual materials to visual research ethics

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ABSTRACT

To date, discussions of visual research ethics have largely focussed on the effects for participants, with increasing attention on how researchers are ethically affected by visual research. However, there has been no sustained examination into how visual materials themselves have ethical consequences in visual research. In this paper we argue that visual research presents with particular ethical challenges because of the capacities of visual materials themselves to act in research encounters. The paper draws on a research project where participants generated two different kinds of visual materials: timeline charts and photos. We show how timeline charts and photos elicit different kinds of imaginative, bodily and sensory responses, and activate memory in contrasting ways. We argue these capacities give visual materials agency, or the power to act. The agentic capacities of the visual materials act in specific ways to co-create a network of relations across the research encounters. This network of relations has the capacity to act in particular ethical ways with serious consequences, not just for research participants, but also for researchers. We propose that the action of visual materials needs to be added to discussion about visual research ethics. Drawing on the concept of ethical sustainability, we advocate for extending situated ethics and researcher reflexivity to include consideration of the agentic capacities of visual materials.

Keywords: visual research, research ethics, timelines, photos, situated ethics, reflexivity.

Introduction

The use of visual methods in the social sciences has expanded rapidly over recent years. Visual research commonly employs videos, photos, drawings and a range of graphics; images can be researcher or participant-generated or collected from existing sources. Two main streams of visual research centre around participant-generated photos and graphics, which are later incorporated in interviews with researchers, broadly referred to as photo elicitation (Lapenta, 2011) and graphic elicitation (Bagnoli, 2009). In graphic elicitation participants are invited to generate drawings, diagrams, timelines, maps, matrices, and flowcharts. The research project we draw on in this paper used participant-generated photos and timeline charts to explore participants' experiences of wellbeing. Participant-generated timeline charts and photos are commonly used in visual research, and their different forms enable comparison between contrasting modes of action. The paper shows how visual materials themselves act in research encounters, by contrasting the co-creative and affective function of photos and charts on the researcher.

Researchers doing research with photos have identified how photos enable different research processes in contrast to verbal-only methods. Participant-generated photos are thought to facilitate participants sharing an expanded range of emotion and experience including increased intensity of feeling. Padgett (2013) observes that making photos allowed "emotional catharsis and creative expression" in participants (p. 1442). The process of producing photos for research encounters has been identified as providing participants with an opportunity to reflect on their lives, which participants reported they enjoyed (Johnsen, May, & Cloke, 2008, p. 197). Other researchers show how the use of participant-generated photos helps to communicate the bodily engagement between participants and their world and the sensual aesthetic dimensions of life (Pink, 2011; Slutskaya & Simpson, 2012, pp. 26-29). Photos enable sharing about environments and places, and the connections participants have to material worlds and objects (Johnsen, et al., 2008; McLeod, 2014a; Warren, 2002). In addition to enhanced participant participation, photos expand interactions between researchers and participants by assisting collaborative meaning- making (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Rose, 2012) and increased intimacy of exchange (Sitvast & Abma, 2012, p. 190). The capacities of photos are also apparent when used as part of photovoice research projects, which have an explicit community participation and development agenda (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). The use of photos in participatory research has been shown to facilitate the participation of vulnerable groups in research projects (Radley, Hodgetts & Cullen, 2005) and communication about aspects of research participants' lives that are not easily accessible to researchers (Cabassa et al, 2012). The empowerment derived from participating in photovoice research projects can contribute toward individuals participating productively in their communities (Stack, Magill & McDonah 2004).

Timeline charts are another commonly used form of participant-generated visual material. Narrative researchers often use timeline charts because timelines evoke chronological time and invite the ordering and evaluation of experience (Sandelowski, 1999). Researchers such as Bagnoli (2009) and Sheridan et al (2011) use timelines to encourage participants to use narrative to actively reflect on past and future lives. Like

photos, having a timeline as part of the interview is said to enable richer discussion between researcher and participant (Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006). Similarly, timeline charts have been found to support exploration of the complexity of experience (Jackson, 2013).

There is a broad, multidisciplinary trajectory across the social sciences and humanities that is challenging Western Enlightenment humanism and the authentic, rational individual. The increasing engagement with visual materials in research projects is located within, and informed by, this trajectory. A key concern is expanding notions of agency to include the action of nonhuman elements. Matter itself is regarded as being able to act, as having the ability to make a difference, produce effects, initiate action, move, and change shape (Bennett, 2005, p.446; Latour 2014, p.22.). In other words, material and nonhuman elements are regarded as having agentic capacities. Applied to research encounters, all proximate human and nonhuman elements are regarded as active co-participants in forming a relational network, which produces the research encounter. Researcher and researched are similarly co-constructed through the encounter, and emerge from the encounter in a reconfigured way (Stengers, 2000; Thrift 2003). In addition, the overall relational network has agentic capacity (Deleuze, 1992). The power of this capacity or action (to engage, relate and connect) is called affect and is an intensity or force that exceeds the subject (Massumi, 2002). This approach shifts attention towards the agentic capacities of nonhuman elements in research projects, and methodological approaches that attend to elements and the associations between them (Vitellone 2013, McLeod 2014b).

A key component of this broad theoretical trajectory is to articulate the material aspects of life. The material specificity of images has received extensive attention across many disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, gender studies, and media studies. Theoretical constructs such as the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), the punctum (Barthes, 1981), and embodied vision (Merleau-Ponty, 1964) have been developed to account for what the visual does, and how images are read or affectively experienced. Feminist film theory draws on theoretical discourses to understand how films produce their meanings, and how the specificity of the film medium (such as lighting, editing, camera work) create hidden structures of meaning. If visual objects are looked at, and learnt from, in all their specificity as Kuhn (2004) advocates, images themselves are considered to have agentic capacities. Numerous forms of visual action have been articulated, including by Silverman (1996), who argues images can bring the past into relation with the present, in ways that transform both past and present. Jones (2002) shows how images work reciprocally through interpretive bridges. The extensive engagement with the materiality of the visual in media and film studies has resulted in comprehensive tools for analysing the interplay between the spectator and the screen. In contrast, research projects using visual research methods do not explicate, to the same degree, how the images in the research encounter act, and co-construct the research encounter.

The lack of engagement with the material action of images in research is consistent with the limited commentary about researchers being affected by the images themselves. Pink (2011) encourages researchers to actively engage with photos using all their

senses, because she understands photos as "evoking the multisensory experience of the co-aesthetic environment represented" (p. 609). A small number of scholars argue that a willingness to reflect on how researchers are affected in the research processes, including the responses that participants' photos rouse in researchers, may generate helpful insights into the dynamics of research encounters (for examples see McLeod, 2014b, pp. 384-385; Warren, 2008, p. 569; Jackson, 2013, p. 426).

The literature on visual research ethics contains only a small commentary about the effects of visual materials. Ethical issues in visual research have been identified by researchers reflecting on their practice (for example Vince & Warren, 2012, pp. 286-287); professional bodies in their guidelines, such as The International Visual Sociology Association (Papademas & The International Visual Sociology Association, 2009), and broader texts on visual methods (such as Pink, 2012). In general, the guidelines outline principles to think through dilemmas and recognise the contextual nature of issues. The most commonly discussed ethical issues in visual research are: ensuring the safety and privacy of participants; managing the collaborative relationship; protecting participants from harm; ensuring informed consent; understanding legalities around visual products; managing the production, analysis, storage and display of visual materials; ensuring confidentiality, and navigating ownership issues. Generally, ethical concerns relate to the wellbeing of participants and ensuring participants are protected from harm. Commentary on researcher conduct speaks to managing the emotionality of using visual methods via trust and rapport (Padgett et al., 2013, p. 1442). Pauwels (2008) does point to the possibility of the image itself negatively impacting on participants, identifying a risk that participants "may even suffer from viewing their own images" (p. 249). Overall, there is little regard for the action of visual materials themselves on participants, and even less attention given to the potential impact of visual materials on researchers.

In a paper addressing ethical issues of visual research Clark (2013) briefly discusses how images have the capacity, using Mitchell's (2011) term, to "haunt" us. He uses this idea to ask ethical questions about why we are aesthetically drawn to certain images, and shares how this can affect decision making around what images to display and use in research projects. Clark points to how visual materials themselves are actors; they do things, in visual research, in ways that invite ethical scrutiny. This paper responds to the need for greater explication of how visual materials act in research encounters, and enhanced consideration of the ethical consequences of this action on researchers.

The body of the paper is organised into two sections. The first section highlights the agentic properties of participant-generated timeline charts, and the second section illustrates how photos were agents in the research encounters. We show how charts and photos have different capacities to elicit: memories; sensory, bodily and imaginative responses; and synaesthesia – where the stimulation of the visual leads to involuntary experiences in another sense. In this way, the charts and photos were active in co-constructing contrasting interactions between the visual materials,

participants and researcher. The positions taken up by the researcher were co-produced with the visual materials in the research encounter, and included the position of being unexpectedly destabilised by the effects of participant-generated photos. This is followed by a discussion about the implications of adding the agentic capacities of visual materials to visual research processes, visual ethics, and research practice.

The agentic capacities of participant-generated timeline charts[1]

The illustrations to follow draw on a research project with eight participants that aimed to explore their experiences of wellbeing and antidepressant use (McLeod 2013; McLeod 2014a). Debates about antidepressant action are usually underpinned by the depressed individual and oscillate between whether antidepressants work to remedy chemical imbalances in the brains of depressed people, or produce inauthentic states of being. I wanted to explore how people experienced antidepressant use without evoking these potentially negative positions. This approach is informed by the insight that there are broader aspects of experience that cannot be subsumed in the subject positions taken up by users of mental health services (Brown and Tucker, 2010). The main strategy was to displace the usual subject position of the 'depressed individual' from the research processes. Instead, an expanded notion of agency, which includes the action of nonhuman elements, was applied to all stages of the research project (McLeod, 2014b). I invited participants to share their experiences of changing wellbeing over time, using a timeline on a chart. Participants then took photos in their own time to correspond with key time points on the wellbeing charts. In a second encounter, I asked participants to show and discuss their photos with me. The participants came from a variety of cultural backgrounds and ages, but shared some key characteristics including: tertiary education, professional work roles, and access to a range of support for their emotional well-being. The timeline chart illustrations below describe aspects of my first encounter with two research participants, as they drew a line indicating their changing wellbeing levels on a chart.

Timeline Chart One

I meet Cameron in a café, busy with lunchtime trade. Cameron bounds up to the table, a tall, fresh-faced woman in her early 30s. Cameron is enthused to participate in the research project and launches without hesitation into showing her wellbeing levels over time using a line on a chart. She immediately selects the time of her birth as the starting point to her story. I watch as Cameron moves her hand fluently across the chart drawing a fluctuating line in one smooth action. Cameron notes her increasing ages across the bottom of the chart, making visible her sense of time tracking evenly, accumulating year by year.

As she draws Cameron provides a succinct narrative of the key life events that contributed towards her fluctuating wellbeing. She reinforces each fluctuation in the line with a series of causal explanations about her wellbeing levels. The 'low point'
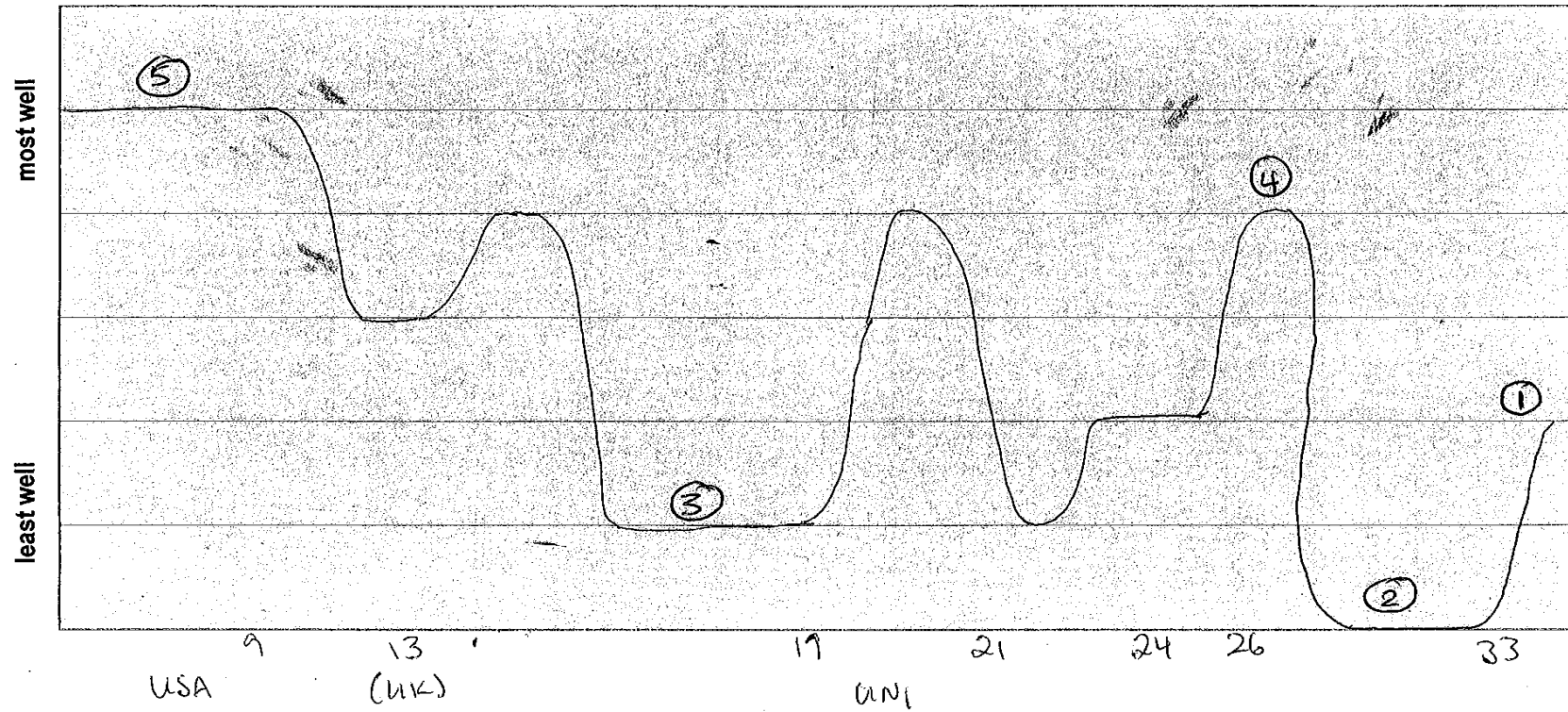
Your levels of wellness

Figure 1. Timeline Chart 1.

around her 33rd year is described as a logical manifestation of life circumstances:

> I hated Australia, I hated my job. I had no friends. I had a serious rift with my father at the time, who objected to me getting married. I sort of hoped to get these lovely in-laws when I got married and they don't like me. So I basically had nothing to get up for in the morning.

The moving line on the chart holds both our gaze and attention and gives us a shared reference point. I feel like the visual clarity and definition of the line resonates with Cameron's explanations of life events and the strategies that mediated her wellbeing at these life stages. The enduring presence of chronological time on the chart works to develop an account of events that makes temporal sense.

The fluctuations in the line prompt me to ask Cameron questions about what the line shows about her life. Cameron is animated in her responses; this is a way of accounting for her experiences that she enjoys. Observing this, I appreciate Cameron is invested in sharing her capacity to make sense of her changing wellbeing levels over time. I want to support Cameron's investment in the line and find it easy to engage with the logic of the account. I ask Cameron questions that invite her to further clarify her rational reasoning for her affective flux. Cameron draws on an additional explanatory framework to logically account for why her wellbeing has changed over time. She understands herself as having a medically-defined neurochemical lack:

> I mean, if I had diabetes, I'd take insulin. I don't have serotonin, or I have low serotonin, so this brings me up to the same level as everybody else. You know I'm not perfect, but I feel like I'm functioning like a normal person, not like a neurotic.

I am familiar with how neurochemistry is used to explain wellbeing. I accept these terms and use them with Cameron to understand the changes presented on the chart. With the line as a shared guide, we connect the discussion about times of despair to a category of person who has a neurochemical lack, and who has since been remedied with antidepressant medication. We make more connections between Cameron's fluctuating states and clear categories and definitions of experience. Our exchange makes me feel this is an enactment that Cameron must be familiar with in other contexts. I feel like Cameron is interacting with me as she might towards a health professional, who is there to facilitate her formulating a logical story about her affective flux. Cameron appears to like the process of engaging with the chart, and her rendering of a self who has ups and downs but is now intact. She is able to deploy extensive logic to explain the shape of her life to me.

Timeline Chart Two

Steve wears a crisp sports shirt and a baseball cap. He takes up the wellbeing chart exercise without hesitation. Steve speaks calmly and draws like there is no need to ponder

or consider how his words and memories connect with the line: "If I put here, the trigger point", when "everything changed, a dark cloud came over" and "everything was a battle after that". The trigger point is a dot at the beginning of the chart. From 1998 to another point, 1999, he draws a thick, clear line. I ask Steve to describe what that time was like. His words have the same thick clarity of the line:

> I just didn't give a shit anymore. Not a great deal mattered. It was like someone absolutely took something away from me. Like someone took anything that mattered away from me.

Steve conveys a relaxed certainty about how he accounts for the shift in his state at this time. He moves into describing an encounter with a video shown to him by the child exploitation unit during his detective training course, saying it was "like I'd been hit with a baseball bat, as soon as it went on". There is a familiar groove to this narrative, like this is one scene in the overall film of his life that has been very well rehearsed. He describes the breaking down of self, in an instant, but the investment in the story, his confident claiming of his interpretation of what happened and how he makes sense of this retrospectively, hold the intensity. I feel attentive toward Steve's account of the changes in his life, but there is a limit to the sharing because the dark line associated with this life stage is just one small aspect of the bigger picture, which Steve is keen to share.

Steve speaks from a position of what he has gleaned from his cumulative experience of affective fluctuation over the last ten years. He presents this as a proud accomplishment: "It's been a long time." He frames his time of despair as one element in a meaningful sequence of events. Steve completes the line on the chart by extending it up and beyond the boundary of the chart, indicating his sense that his wellbeing continues to improve over time. Steve's retrospective experiences seem removed from me, always placed in supportive relation to his current notion of self. I feel like I am taking up a position as an interested listener, who is focussing on the meaning of Steve's words, in relation to his experience.

I glean the sincerity of Steve's sharing and reciprocate by giving regard to his overall story, and affirm the production of self it supports. I invite Steve to elaborate on how he discerns differences in his state. Steve easily shares how he deploys the insight he has accumulated over time toward navigating his life in his own, unique way:

> I've been sort of dealing with this now, for ten years. I can sort of recognise things a lot more, and have a lot of strategies on how to deal with things and I can get by as far as that's concerned. I can recognise what's just a bit of an off day or a day where it's blowing a gale and it's raining. I can tell the difference when it's also depression-related. I can see what the differences are, and I know what I need to do.

The detailed line chart reinforces the quiet confidence Steve conveys in his account of himself. He explains the social reinforcement he gets in other contexts from speaking from his position of cumulative insight. Steve has an active profile as a depression
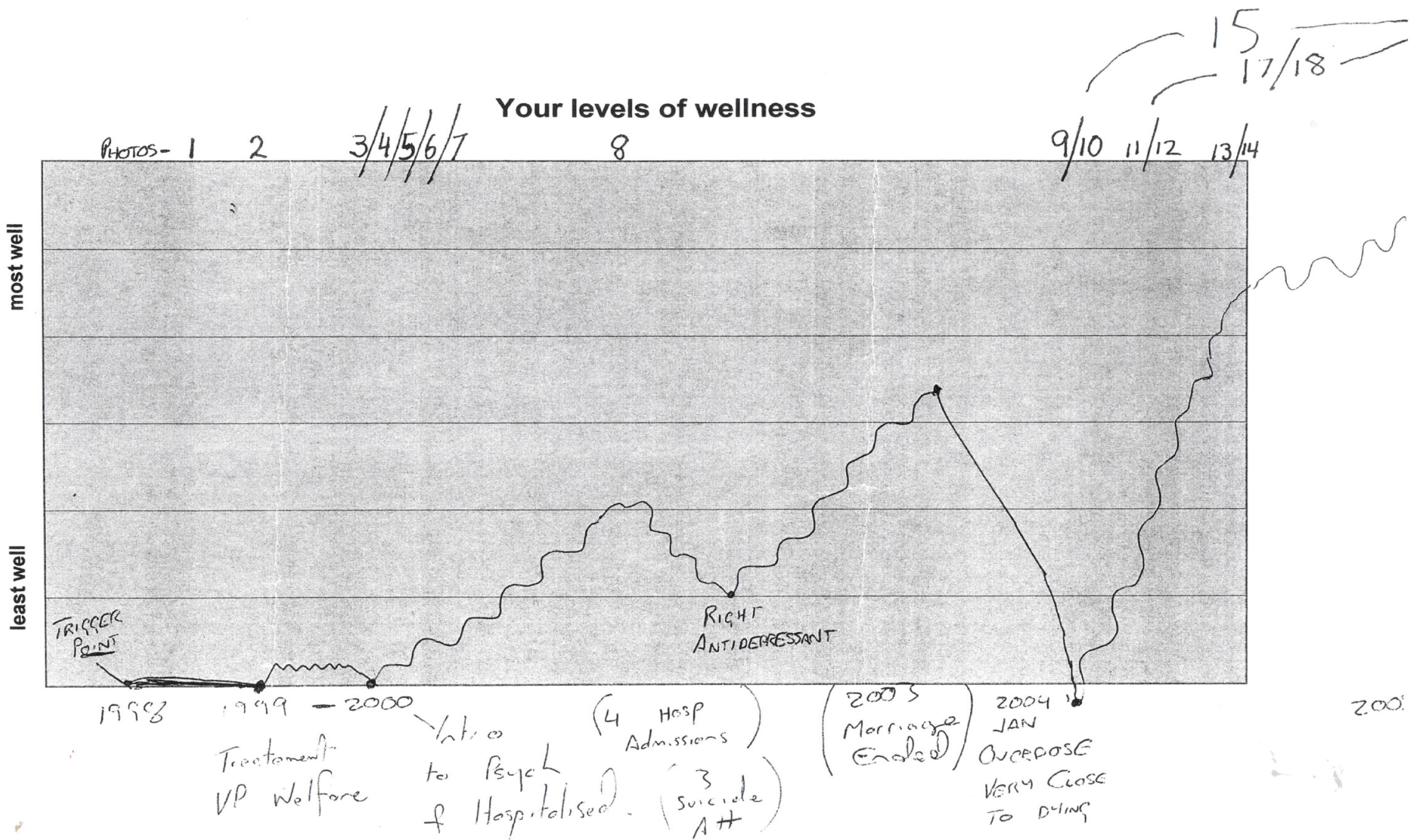
Figure 2. Timeline Chart 2.

consumer advocate:

> I always say, if there's something I can do that one person will get something out of, that can have them avoid what I went through, it's good enough for me. I mean I know that a lot of it is through meeting people who have experienced it...I can say, I know how you might be feeling; I've been there. I think that's something quite substantial.

Steve's explanation conveys again to me that his investment in claiming the overall story of the past ten years has been enabling for him. The overall rendering of the entirety of the line on the chart, and the kind of person it produces – the clear, discriminating, unified depressed person – is what matters to Steve. I continue to ask Steve to elaborate more from this current position. The overall shape of the line assists me to frame my questions about how the fluctuations of the past are supporting what is now possible.

These two accounts show how the visual materiality of the line on the chart has specific agentic capacities. The presence of the line highlighted chronological time (Sandelowski, 1999) and invited the use of logic and narrative meaning to account for affective flux (Sermijn, 2008). Co-constructed with the properties of the line (Suchet-Pearson et al., 2013, p. 383), both the research participants and I moved to positions that were unified and defined by a clear boundary, as subjects who are centred (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013; Stephenson, 2005). This impacted the kind of exchange that was co-produced between us. The participants took up positions as reflective, active individuals who communicated their bodily experiences and memories in an ordered, contained and coherent way. They enacted a well-rehearsed patient narrative in relation to their wellbeing line, reflecting their familiarity with taking up this kind of position with the psychologists, psychiatrists and general practitioners they consulted for their mental health issues. I was co-constructed as an interested and attentive observer to the participants' experiences, memories and stories. My position was akin to a health professional who used the same categories and definitions to explain life changes, and who also used logic to understand fluctuation. From this position I had easy verbal exchange with the participants to help them to discern and make sense of their fluctuating lines. The agentic properties of the line were part of co-constructed interactions that contained the affective force of memories and limited bodily, sensory and imaginative engagement across the research encounters. The participants' accounts of antidepressant use and wellbeing in these research encounters aligned with those generated in the research interviews. The next section of the paper illustrates how participant-generated photos had contrasting agentic capacities to the charts. The photos co-participated in the research encounter interactions in different ways to the line on the wellbeing chart. This led to the participants and I taking up positions that contrasted starkly to the ones described here.

The agentic capacities of participant-generated photos

At the end of the timeline chart encounter, I invited participants to take some photos to illustrate what was happening in their lives at different points on their wellbeing charts. Participants planned, took, and edited their photos in their own time. Participants came

to our second meeting with their photos and a pre-planned narrative to explain what the photos were meant to convey.

Photo One
A young mother who works part-time, Athena has a warm and generous manner. She enjoyed taking her photos and is keen to share them with me over a cup of tea. She has taken a photo to accompany her story about reconnecting with a boyfriend, which she has given the title of "Blooming".

Athena recorded notes when she took the photo to capture what she wanted it to convey. She reads her notes out loud to me:

> Meeting Christopher again was like a boost or blooming within. I felt a surge of happiness as opposed to previously feeling empty. Finding love again is just as beautiful as a tree filled with beauty as opposed to looking bereft and visually unattractive.

I listen to Athena say "boost" and "blooming within" and look at the photo. It is like I too am having an encounter with the blossoming tree, standing near it, marvelling at the light puffs of blossom and catching their scent on the breeze. I inhabit the place from which Athena took the photo and feel the transition Athena describes, from feeling empty to an expanded and joyous state. I feel like the photo is pushing an imaginative force at me, taking me somewhere, to a new state.

Athena elaborates further:

> In springtime, without you even realising, there's flowers on the tree. It just makes the tree feel good, it would make a person feel good too. A nice day makes you feel good, as opposed to when it rains, you feel like shit. You feel terrible.

Athena does not couch her rendering of transformation in terms of an interior state. The spontaneous flowering in spring enlivens both her and the tree. Listening to this account and looking at the photo, I feel like I am one of the many elements in a context that is feeling enlivened by a transformation. I have an impulse to share my responses to encountering the photo of the blooming tree with Athena, but it's clear that Athena is disinterested in my responses. This does not inhibit my imaginative responses from proliferating. However, as they are not expressed, the evoked images and feelings travel away from the encounter down a separate trajectory. But I retain a sense that I have contributed something to the encounter, by feeling the collective transformation that Athena describes (in her, in the day, and in the tree).

I am touched by the vulnerability of Athena sharing her photo and story. This is an Athena who has been profoundly moved and affected by reuniting with her boyfriend. For a moment I am struck by how much this contrasts to the active, intentional positions enacted by the participants with their timeline charts. Athena is not static or bounded

Figure 3. Photo One

here. The photo is enabling her to present a moment from her life that she experiences as a process of change. I want to reciprocate the trust Athena is showing by sharing these intimate dimensions of her existence. I do not want to fix, or make static what Athena is presenting as dynamic, so I take care to not enact the unified, reflective health professional position I took up during the chart encounters. Instead, I bring my attention onto the process of change that Athena is sharing, and try to embody a trust in this process. Delimited from articulating my verbal responses to the photo, I move to a familiar improvisatory position of the non-evaluative witness: of being attuned to any processual changes, imaginatively willing to expand them, but not invested in any particular outcome.

Photo Two
Rowan, a university student in his early 20s, has taken a lot of care to prepare photos to convey to me the range to states he has been in over recent years. He presents a photo he took to share a despairing period in his life. Rowan explains:

> This is just to represent suicidal tendencies or suicide attempt. This would have been before the relationship ended, but after everything went wrong, because a lot of unfortunate things happened, it didn't end when it should have. It followed on from this and just got worse, and worse, and worse. I like the imagery of the receding into darkness. You can't see your hand, that blindness. That's what it was, the absolute incapacity to see anything beyond that point.

As I listen to Rowan's words I am lured into a viewing position. Like Rowan, I lean out over the platform, and look into the darkness down the receding train track. The photo brings me into immediate contact with Rowan's experience. I feel the cold night air, the edge of danger in the possibility of an oncoming train. I ask Rowan what title he might consider giving to the photo. He replies:

> Something simple, like "blind". 'Cause that's really, looking back on it now, that's what I feel that I was. The sheer weight of that moment just stopped me from being able to see anything in front of me. That's where the tracks ended and all I could see was that receding into darkness.

Rowan's description further evokes the position of leaning out over the train tracks. Rowan is unable to see or consider any other options, closed off from any alternatives except subsisting with the "sheer weight of that moment"; he is incapable of finding a way to form a self. Rowan describes one trajectory, of negativity and diminishment, where life gets "worse, and worse, and worse", to the extent that he feels he is only progressing towards wanting to die. His words and the photo communicate a state that is unbearably closed off, immobilised, breaking down and unable to connect to the outside world. He does not welcome my attempts to reflect back to him what he has conveyed, indicating my verbal input is not required for him to satisfactorily communicate this affective state. I am limited to relating to the photo and Rowan's words with my body and imagination. I am struck by how this experiential state is present in a way that is very different to the way despair was

related in the chart encounters, when a more active self was produced.

I am moved that Rowan is sharing this moment with me and I want to form a supportive and respectful audience as best I can, within the confines of a nonverbal role. The only move available to me is to use my body to simply be present to the state of pain and suffering the photo communicates. It feels like this requires a form of stillness, or a slowing of time, so that I can be present to the rhythm of the state that Rowan is sharing. I contain my bodily intensity of being present to the photo, because it seems important to not contribute to escalating any sense of despair in the situation.

Photo Three
Steve (this is the same participant featured in Chart One of the paper) arrives with his photos on a memory stick for us to look at. He has made a list of the photos at his own instigation, numbered them, ordered them and written a brief explanation of what he wanted to show in each photo. He has a clear sense of how we should proceed. However, the process of taking the photos affected Steve in ways that he had not anticipated. He mentions this in relation to one of the first photos he shows me, which depicts a garage, the location of a planned suicide attempt:

> Taking the photos, some of them I'd take, and I'd leave it alone. I'd just leave it on the computer and go and do something else. So the photos had been taken over different days. Because I knew why it was I was taking the photos. If someone said take a photo of your garage, fine, take a photo of my garage. But I was taking it for a reason, to show the location. So yeah, some of this wasn't without a bit of emotion.

He goes on to describe the photo to me:

> So that's the garage. I had a rope already hung over. No-one would even know what it was, because I look after the garage and it was just like it was tied to something else. But all I had to do was pull the rope and it would drop down. Probably the thing that would take the longest is move the car out of the garage, longer than anything else.

I am affected by Steve's practical planning for ending his life. I glance at the photo, taking in Steve's words at the same time as I note the utilitarian garage objects in Steve's garage. I feel like I can smell the dusty interior of the garage. A flicker runs from my sternum down my back. For a half-moment I notice the quicksilver sensation through me, but like watching a light that is extinguishing – so fast – in the next half-moment I am no longer sure anything happened. My attention swings fully back to Steve, his photos and story. Steve is sharing a vulnerable moment, and I need to be a receptive audience. I sustain this orientation through the rest of the encounter. The notes I write immediately after the encounter hint at the impact of being present to Steve's photos:

> It feels like I've been taken into so many worlds, like I was on the journey too. Almost like I didn't need him to flesh out with words what it was like, because

Figure 4. Photo Two

Figure 5. Photo Three

it was evoked for me. Very drained by the interview. Very saturated. I can feel the images moving around in front of my eyes. I'm very aware that looking is interpretation, hearing is interpretation. But it's harder to be conscious of what I am bringing, in that interpretive moment, to the looking at the photo. Like it escapes my rational capture.

A year later, I am asked how my PhD is going, and the voice I use to answer sounds strange to me, detached. Later on, driving home in the dark, in the rain, I watch the windscreen wipers flick back and forth, back and forth. A memory of the garage photo flicks past my eyes, following the movement of the windscreen wiper. The next instant is filled with a visual image of the interior of a garage from my childhood. A total, intact, return to a place I have given no conscious regard to for many years. Somehow, at the same time, I recall the sense of the dustiness of Steve's garage, and I am – eight, perhaps – feeling the grit of my family's garage concrete floor under small gumboots. I am filling up the grass mower with the can of petrol, enjoying the tang of petrol fumes. To this complete, sensory, and spatial return to childhood, other memories join. The memories intersect to create trajectories that seem to have a life of their own, and they move me with them. My everyday life is interrupted by an overflow of memories. Fortunately I am able to bring these disrupted aspects of self back into relation with broader contexts in personal, academic, creative and therapeutic places.

The illustrations above have shown how the imaginative, bodily, sensory, synaesthetic, and memory capacities of photos co-constructed particular kinds of interactions; these were characterised by the proliferation of imagination and memory and the communication of affectively intense states of being. In contrast to the chart encounters, when discussing the photographs the participants did not move to a position of a unified depressed identity. The agentic properties of photos included the capacity to convey affective force, received as sensation (Barthes, 1981) which enabled the photographs to enact partial, affectively intense, transformative processes. The photos had an agentic capacity of setting up a viewing position (Rose, 2007, p. 41). This agentic capacity guided me to empathically enter into the place occupied by the body of the research participant (Pink, 2011) and facilitated my imaginative engagement with the photo. I was co-constructed as a nonverbal participant in the encounter, taking up the silent but active position of the witness (Laub, 1992; Poland, 2000). In particular, the photos had the capacity to evoke nonvolitional memory (Anderson, 2004) in ways that had profound effects on me, as researcher. Due to the particular agentic capacities of photos, my body, imagination, senses and memory were activated in ways that contrasted markedly to my positioning in the timeline chart encounters.

The chart and photo encounters were striking in enabling the research participants and I to move to contrasting positions, from which to interact in different ways. In the chart encounter the research participants moved to a unified depressed identity; my position was constructed as a kind of health professional, where research participants conveyed an easy, rehearsed narrative about their experiences. In contrast, the photographs facilitated the communication of affectively intense transformative processes. In this context, I felt it was appropriate to position myself as a non-verbal witness – a position

that re-occurred in all my encounters with the photos. The differences point to how contrasting elements were proximate to the chart and photo encounters. For example, the presence of the line on the timeline chart made chronological time proximate to the encounter in a way that the photos did not. The proximity of chronological time informed how the research participants shaped their experiences to follow a cumulative and logical trajectory. The contrasting visual mediums were associated with different processes of production. The charts were drawn in my presence, and the photos were made in a creative process undertaken by the research participants in their own time. This required creativity, imagination and memory. In creating the photos the research participants connected to a range of material elements from their lives outside the research encounters, ranging from evocative objects to environments associated with particular embodied states. This meant a greater range of more affectively intense elements were proximate to the photo research encounter.

Discussion[2]

The illustrations in this paper have shown how the actions of visual materials are part of a network of relations across research encounters. These networks of relations can act in ethical ways with serious consequences for the researcher, not only at the time of viewing, but long after the initial research encounter. We argue that agentic capacities of visual materials need to be included in ethical considerations about visual research. We will now explore the implications of this argument for visual research ethics and practice. In this research project, being open to the agentic capacities of visual materials was productive for the researcher and the research. It allowed exposure to the intimacy of both despairing and joyful moments in the participants' lives. In addition, being open to how the visual materials co-constructed different networks of relations enabled the researcher to emerge from the research encounters in contrasting positions – as a unified professional with the timeline charts, and as a partial, non-verbal witness to the photos. The insights generated from this methodological approach produced novel findings about antidepressant use (McLeod, 2014a) and wellbeing (McLeod, 2013). The unexpected possibilities of how visual materials act became part of the productivity of the research. Unexpected outcomes have been identified as part of the potential of engaging in novel research processes (Dewsbury, 2010).

To optimise engagement with the agentic capacities of visual materials, explicit consideration should be given to what visual materials do throughout a visual research project. The possible agentic properties of particular visual materials can be taken into account during project design. Researchers can ask: Is it is going to be a productive strategy to bring participants into contact with the selected visual objects, given their potential agentic properties? During research encounters researchers can actively explore how the action of visual materials contributes to the relational networks that are created during research encounters (for examples of this approach see Demant, 2009; McLeod, 2014b). Researchers can engage with the unexpected effects of visual materials to inform how the research project develops (Koro-Ljungberg & Barko 2012). In addition to visual research processes, we suggest the action of visual materials be added to existing ethical frames in visual research, and that it inform researchers' ethical practice.

We advocate adding consideration of how visual materials themselves act, to situated ethical approaches and conduct, which broadly acknowledge that ethical issues emerge, are negotiated and resolved throughout visual research projects (Clark, 2013; Pauwels, 2008, p. 254; Wiles, Clark, & Prosser, 2011). Understandings about what constitutes the research context can expand to include the active co-participation of visual materials. A key component of situated ethics is the notion of reflexivity, where the researcher scrutinises their own contribution and role in the research processes and critically reflects on how knowledge is generated (Guillemin, 2004, pp. 273-277). We suggest adding awareness of the action of visual materials to researchers' reflexivity about visual research processes.

Researchers can undertake practical strategies to cultivate a reflexivity that includes visual action. In their guidelines for ethical research, Cox et al (2014) discuss the possible ethical effects of personal and evocative imagery, and pose the question: "How do researchers identify and respond to their own experiences of potential vulnerability?" (p. 12). This is a useful question for researchers to consider prior to undertaking a visual research project. In addition, researchers can explore how they are affected by different visual forms, and develop an awareness of their reactions. Other research projects featuring participant-generated visual materials provide a good resource for researchers to actively consider the agentic effects of different images. This kind of reflexivity will not only minimise harm, but enhance the possible productive engagement with visual materials. We have articulated in detail how the researcher's contribution was part of the relational configuring of the research events. This suggests researcher reflexivity can also be extended to include how the researcher co-participates in the emergent relations between visual materials, researcher and researched. Pink (2007) identifies how researchers need to develop a high level of awareness of their own contribution given the production of images within research encounters is collaborative.

This paper has demonstrated how relational networks, co-created by the action of visual materials, can have effects long after the initial research encounter. This suggests that visual researchers need to consider the ethical effects of the networks of relations around visual materials throughout the entirety of the research process. In the project described in this paper, what ensued was the breaking down between different aspects of the researcher's life and certain photos. At first glance, this could be defined as harm to the researcher, and should be avoided. Research ethics guidelines generally espouse minimising harm in research projects. However, the paper shows the productive possibility of working with decomposing networks of relations in a way that was positive for the researcher, the project and which enabled the insights that inform this paper. It is possible to reconfigure the distressing memories and feelings triggered by visual materials. Similarly, Guillemin and Drew (2010) report that sharing images of emotional experiences with a supportive and empathetic researcher can be productive for participants (p. 185). Images, therefore, have the potential to be challenging, distressing, productive and transformative for both researchers and participants. The ethical space around visual materials is dynamic and can change over time. Ethical practice with visual materials needs to be attentive to processes that extend beyond the initial research encounters, and be open to the possibility of negative experiences being transformed into positive ones through the research processes.

A concept that supports this orientation is described by Braidotti (2006a) as ethical sustainability, or the processes by which a person lasts, or endures, by exploring different ways of inhabiting our bodies. Braidotti notes how a sustainable subject endures sustainable changes by enacting around them a community or collectivity. As described in the paper, it was through multiple supportive contexts that the researcher was able to re-work what occurred into a new configuration. Braidotti lends support to the importance of attending to the effort, resources and contexts necessary to support transformative processes in visual research. In addition, she suggests a way of conceptualising ethical action as not merely about minimising and avoiding harm. Reworking what has decomposed into what can be sustained over time is, for Braidotti, (2006b) (following Deleuze and Spinoza), ethical action (pp. 270-278).

Mol (2008) and de la Bellacasa (2011) develop an orientation to practice called an "ethics of care" that is useful for researchers interested in enacting ethical sustainability in visual research practice. They advocate for ethical responsiveness, or to respond with care to all the components of an encounter, with a view towards sustainability or productivity. When ethics of care approaches are used in visual research, it is usually to inform practices that benefit research participants (Wiles et al., 2011, p. 686). Importantly for visual research, Mol and de la Bellacasa extend their discussions of an ethics of care to include responsiveness to the action of nonhuman actors. Mol (2008) suggests those working from an ethics of care cultivate an "experimental attitude" (p. 108) toward all aspects of the situation. This orientation can resource visual researchers to actively explore the emergent relations between visual materials, researcher and researched during research encounters, in a way that is mindful of a sustainable process for all. In our project, supportive spaces, people and ideas were crucial to the possibility of the researcher being a sustainable component of the research. This reflects how, as Braidotti (2006a) observes, "processes of change are so important and ever so vital and necessary, that they have to be handled with care" (p. 133). An ethics of care, then, would consider and plan for resources to support the researcher to be a cared-for component throughout the research project.

de la Bellacasa (2011) emphasises that acting from an ethics of care means using bodily, material activity to relate to things, in order to become affected by them (pp. 90-99). This paper indicated how the researcher's bodily engagement facilitated openness to the action of the visual, and was also implicated in the reconfiguring processes. There are myriad of bodily practices, such as dance, yoga, and improvisation, that develop skills in bodily awareness and receptivity and which can resource visual research practice. Such practices can also enhance understanding of bodily limitations to the intensity of certain situations. For Braidotti (2006b), an understanding of the limitations of what is sustainable for us is crucial to ethical sustainability, and it is our bodies that will convey this limit to us (pp. 159-160).

Through comparison of the contrasting agentic capacities of participant-generated timeline charts and photos, this paper has shown how visual materials themselves

have ethical consequences in visual research. We identified how discussion of visual research, visual research ethics and visual research practice can be expanded to include consideration of the agentic capacities of visual materials. This explains how the ethical space is conceived to include what visual materials do during visual research. The articulation of this space requires further investigation by visual researchers into how relational networks are configured throughout visual projects.

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Endnotes:

1. In this section of the paper, singular first person is used to represent the first author's experiences.

2. This section of the paper returns to using the plural personal pronoun.