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TITLE PAGE

Title

Using photography in research with young migrants: addressing questions of visibility, movement and personal spaces.

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Title

Using photography in research with young migrants: addressing questions of visibility, movement and personal spaces.

Abstract

This article discusses the experience of using photography in a research project with young (prospective) migrants in Ghana and Italy. Photography can be an empowering research tool, one that offers young participants a degree of control over the research process and thus allows their points of view to emerge. However, researchers need to consider that the choice of subjects may be influenced by the children's desire to avoid taking photographs in public, as they may attract attention and the act of pointing a camera may provoke unwanted questions and comments. Moreover, young people often lack the means to move independently, and this may further restrict the subjects they are able to photograph. Finally, they may resent adults' intrusion into their free time and therefore see taking photographs as a chore. I argue that all these factors need to receive greater attention when choosing photography in research with young participants.

Keywords

Visual research; photography; children; young people

Using photography as a data collection technique in social research has grown increasingly common as equipment has become cheaper and simpler to use, and as participants' direct involvement in the process of inquiry has gained traction amongst investigators. Photography is used to gather insights into a wide range of subjects, and is utilised by both academic and non-academic researchers (Barker and Smith, 2012; Lal, Jarus and Suto, 2012). It is particularly favoured in research with children¹, offering young participants the freedom to choose a response away from the researcher's direct presence and the consequent pressure this can entail (Barker and Weller, 2003). Photography is also selected in research with young people on the grounds that it is a pleasurable activity, one that can add a 'fun' dimension to a research project (Punch, 2002). Because of the greater degree of flexibility and creativity it can offer, photography is thus seen as a tool that can include young people as active participants in the research process (Luttrell, 2010), involving them directly in an enjoyable and engaging manner.

While the positive aspects of photography as a data collection technique in social research are many, and while they have been repeatedly emphasised, many of the questions raised by the use of this technique have yet to find an answer (Luttrell and Chalfen, 2010). Engaging photography to capture the intentions and understandings of young people on their own terms has led to postulate its potential as a technique that allows researchers to '[see] through the eyes of children' (Banks, 2007, 5), and ensured the popularity of the technique. However, the enthusiasm for the potential of photography has also led to neglect regarding the complex dynamics which shape each image. Some authors have indeed stressed a need for caution, particularly with reference to the possible influences that other people - including the absent-yet-

present researcher - may exercise on young participants' choice of subject (Barker and Smith, 2012; Langevang, 2007; Kesby, 2007; Sime, 2008); to the dangers of analysing and interpreting visual data from an adult perspective (Cook and Hess, 2007; Luttrell, 2010; Barker and Smith, 2012); to the lack of a clear framework for the analysis and interpretation of photographs (Punch, 2002; Catalani and Minkler, 2012); and also to the ethical issues relating to anonymity and confidentiality that are specific to visual data (Crow and Wiles, 2008; Wiles, Clark and Prosser, 2011).

However, the discussion has, to the best of my knowledge, largely ignored a simple, yet important element: the act of taking photographs is one that can attract attention, and this simple circumstance may pose serious limitations to the range of places young people are willing to access, something which, in turn, has repercussions on the choice of subjects for children's photographs. Weariness, combined with the limited range of movement that younger children experience, can mean that the subjects young people portray may be the ones that are available within specific confines determined by reachability and comfort, rather than the ones that could best reflect their experiences or views. This is not, I hasten to add, a necessarily detrimental aspect of the technique, and for young participants to feel - and be - comfortable and safe is paramount for researchers. However, I argue that issues of reachability and comfort are elements that will influence the data collected and that, as such, they need to be factored into the research process.

In the following sections I will first discuss how the aim of maximising children's active involvement in the data collection process grounds the choice of participatory methodologies. I will then define what participant-led photography consists of, and

also outline the main reasons that have informed researchers' choice of this technique in research with young people. Following this, I will briefly illustrate the use of photography as a data collection technique in a study involving young migrants and children left behind by migrant parents. I will explain why I chose this technique, how data collection was carried out and the issues that arose at the stage of analysis and interpretation of the visual data. This will be followed by a discussion on the difficulties young people may face when asked to take photographs in the context of a research project, questions which have yet to be adequately addressed by the relevant literature. Finally, I will make some suggestions about strategies that could help to maximise the technique's benefits and, at the same time, redress some of the challenges.

The sociology of childhood, children's agency and participatory techniques

As James and James (2004) argue, in contemporary Western societies the category 'childhood' is predicated on the basis of a binary distinction between adults and non-adults. The power to define and demarcate 'childhood', however, invariably rests with the adult and young people have very little say over matters that concern them because of their lack of political and economic influence; 'Children [...] are presented to us as pre-people, outside the polity' (Mayall, 2000, 246). Together with other factors (gender, ethnicity and place among others) social structure and economic advantage continue to be a strong predictor of young people's opportunities (Stokes et al., 2015). The children of unskilled labour migrants who move from African countries to European cities, who often find themselves at the intersection of multiple

forms of disadvantage, are arguably among the most marginal categories in contemporary Western societies (Knörr, 2005)

While they may lack direct political and economic influence, children do not passively accept the *status quo* and, as Corsaro (2005) notes, they play an active role in interpreting and shaping the reality they are part of. Each individual child contributes in the shaping of the 'childhood' category by pushing the boundaries set by adults; by challenging these boundaries; and by finding gaps and cracks that will allow young people a degree of independent action (Corsaro, 2005; James and Prout, Eds., 1990; Lansdown, 2005). Proof of this, as James and James (2004) note, is the need to set fixed age limits (e.g. on drinking age, or curfews) and to have them enforced and revised as they are endlessly tested and pushed by young people.

The fact that children make sense of their own world and shape their social relations within it is one of the main tenets of 'the sociology of childhood' (Corsaro, 2005). This is a specific field of study which aims to give visibility to children's experiences and understandings as an essential constituent of contemporary society and not simply, as was the case until the emergence of this field in the 1990s, as subsidiary to adults' views, or only relevant to their social status as adults-to-be (Moran-Ellis, 2010). The sociology of childhood also understands childhood as a heterogeneous entity, with age at the intersection of other categories, such as class, ethnicity, gender, etc. (Holloway and Valentine, 2000). The complex nature of childhood needs to be considered in research with young participants, to ensure that the specificity of individuals' experiences is taken into account, and to avoid reducing its complexity into a uniform entity. Since children are gendered, classed, racialised and differently-

abled members of society, their specific background can shape and constrain their agency, and will influence the experiences, expectations, and opportunities they have access to (James and James, 2004; Corsaro, 2005).

Engaging children as active participants in research on matters that are of direct relevance to their experiences and interests can help to redress the lack of visibility of young people's understandings (Kesby, 2005) in social research. Researchers whose work is overtly informed by the sociology of childhood paradigm (e.g. Langevang, 2007; Darbyshire, 2005; Greene and Hill, 2004) have coupled more traditional data collection strategies with participatory techniques (e.g. art-based and visual techniques) in order to gather an insight into children's cultures and understandings. Participatory techniques may allow for more active involvement of young people in the inquiry process and can help to create a collaborative research environment, thus contributing to redress the power imbalance embedded in the adult-child interaction (O'Kane, 2008; Kesby, 2007 and 2005; Punch, 2002; Young and Barrett, 2001). As some authors argue, this does not necessarily lead to effective participation and the risk of tokenism needs to be acknowledged, in particular when participation is reduced to a set of techniques (Cahill, 2007). While not in themselves sufficient to ensure effective empowerment, some forms of data collection can facilitate agency when embedded within participatory processes of inquiry, and when accompanied by open recognition of the power dynamics at work in participatory research (Kesby, 2005). Moreover, as Kesby notes "[...] like power, the discourses and practices constituting empowerment are likely to be embedded in, and be constitutive of, particular material sites and spaces" (2005, 2055). Acknowledging the limitations posed by sites and spaces on young people (in particular when the young people are a

visible minority) is essential to avoid the assumption that participatory spaces take form simply through the use of a specific technique, or even set of techniques, and to ensure transparency when discussing visual data.

In the following section I will discuss the rationale behind the choice of photography in my research project with young (prospective) migrants and with children of migrants. Subsequently, I will illustrate in detail how the technique was applied in the specific context of the research and the practical steps taken to ensure that the visual component of the project worked as smoothly as possible.

Photography in research with young participants

In the context of this article I refer to the technique I adopted as ‘participant-led photography’, or ‘child-led photography’ when indicating more specifically its use in research with young participants. This is a term used by other researchers (e.g. Vince and Warren, 2012; Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Gallagher, 2009) to designate a technique which involves giving (young) participants a camera (digital or disposable) and asking them to take stills according to a set of criteria. Most authors justify the use of photography in research with young participants as a way to encourage the emergence of children’s perspectives. Cook and Hess (2007) report choosing this technique in their study with young people because taking photographs would be quick, easy and fun. Moreover, the authors argue that photography is simpler than writing, as it requires no particular expertise and can, for this reason, be particularly useful in research with younger children. The photographs taken by the participants can create an important support for subsequent one-to-one conversations, as the focus

of the conversations is something the children have personally produced (Clark-Ibáñez, 2007).

Photography is often chosen on the basis of the freedom it gives young people to choose their responses away from the researcher's physical presence and the pressure this can entail (Barker and Smith, 2012; Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2006). It can be an empowering tool, which offers young participants a degree of control over the research process (Myers, 2010) and thus allows their points of view to come across. As Luttrell (2010) notes,

[...] there are multiple layers of meaning in any single photograph and [...] children have intentions and make deliberate choices (albeit prescribed) to represent themselves and others, sometimes in an effort to 'speak back' to dominant or stereotypical images. (Luttrell, 2010, 224)

Photography can introduce content and topics that may otherwise be overlooked by the study, and it can elicit information or points of view (Luttrell, 2010) that are not guided by researchers' expectations. More practically, the use of photographs can be of aid by bypassing the limitations of spoken language (Oh, 2012), such as with very young people, people with specific disabilities or, as in the case of my research, when young people are using a language other than their home language.

Photography in the context of the study

The aim of the research project to which I refer to here was to explore the expectations and experiences of young migrants in relation to differences (both anticipated and lived) between sending and receiving countries. As Sluzki (1979, quoted in Suárez-Orozco, 2000, 197) notes, 'while anticipating the migration and the initial period following the arrival, many immigrants experience a sense of euphoria'. Once settled in the new country, however, a feeling of anxiety and disorientation can take over, especially of the receiving social and physical environment markedly differs from the sending one. The receiving society's attitude to migrants and to minorities may further compound these feelings, and a hostile reception will give rise to distrust, suspicion and anger (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

The focus of this study were young people's imaginings of a country (i.e. places, people, daily life) of which they do not have direct experience, but to which they have emotional links through significant others. The study meant, too, to investigate the way in which young people assess their pre-departure imaginings and expectations once they have moved to a new country. Specifically, the study looked at the expectations and experiences of the children of unskilled labour migrants who had moved from Ghana to Italy. In total, 41 young people between the ages of 10 and 15 took part in the study. Of these, 30 were female and 11 were male. The much greater number of female participants is due to the fact that all young people interviewed in Ghana were female.

The total sample comprised three separate sub-samples. One group of 13 young people had been left behind in Ghana as a consequence of parental migration. All the children in this sub-sample were expecting to join their mothers and/or fathers in Italy

in the near future, but they had no direct experience of Italy. A second group comprised 13 children who were born in Italy of Ghanaian parents. All the participants in this group had little or no direct experience of their parents' country of origin. A final group of 15 children had migrated from Ghana quite recently (four years or less) to join their migrant parent(s) on a family reunion visa. As a consequence, all children in this sub-sample had direct experience of both Ghana and Italy.

The young people left behind in Ghana, who were expecting to move to Italy in the near future, were asked how they imagined Italy; if (and how) they expected their life to change once they joined their parent(s) there; and what they would miss or be happy to leave behind were they to move. The children born in Italy of Ghanaian parents, who only had indirect experience of Ghana, were asked how they expected Ghana to be; what information they had about everyday life there; and who or what was the source of this information. The young migrants who had recently moved from Ghana to Italy were asked to think back to the imaginings and expectations they held prior to migration in the light of the encounter with the 'real' country, and to recount what had surprised them - both positively and negatively - upon arrival. Thus, two of the three samples gave an insight into young people's imaginings and expectations of a country to which they had strong emotional ties but of which they had no (or little) direct experience, while the third group offered a bridge between these two perspectives. The project aimed to add young people's experiences and reflections to the narratives on migration, and to reveal the specific social and emotional investment that children inevitably make in the migration process.

Access to the young participants was gained through the schools they were attending at the time. In Italy these were four middle schools in the North East of the country, an area that has attracted, in the past two decades, a considerable number of Ghanaian migrants. In Ghana, the participants were all attending boarding schools in the area of Greater Accra. Leaving their offspring in a boarding school is a practice quite common among Ghanaian migrants, as it ensures that the children are looked after while being educated in some of the best state-run schools. This justifies the sacrifices entailed in the migration project and, at the same time, avoids the potential conflicts over obligations and allocation of financial resources that can arise in more informal arrangements (Mazzucato and Schans, 2011).

Fieldwork was carried out in two phases. Between September and December 2008 data was gathered in Italy, while between March and May 2009 data was collected in Ghana². Participant-led photography was used as a data collection technique alongside focus groups and individual interviews. The children were all met for a first time in large groups, in order to illustrate the project, ask for the young people's assent, and distribute information leaflets and consent forms destined to parents or guardians. All the young people who agreed to take part were subsequently seen in small groups (between 4 and 6 participants), as being with other young people was deemed to be less unsettling for the children than meeting an unknown, white adult on a one-to-one basis. Each focus group lasted about one hour, at the end of which each child was offered a disposable camera containing 24 exposures. All the young people were reassured that they were under no obligation to take the camera, but all seemed happy to do so. Along with the camera, the children were given information on how to use the disposable cameras and on the etiquette of photography (e.g. asking

permission before taking a close-up photograph of a person; asking the teacher before using the camera during school lessons and making sure this would not disrupt other children's work; ensuring that the camera was kept away from direct sunlight or rain). An age-appropriate leaflet listing the main guidelines on how to operate the cameras was distributed along with the equipment.

The young participants were asked to take at least 12 of the exposures for the project, and told they could use the rest to take any picture they wanted, regardless of the research brief. However, most of the young people did not follow this instruction and told me that they had taken all the photographs for the project. The two sub-samples of children who had no direct experience of Italy or Ghana were asked to photograph anything (places, objects, people, activities) they thought would be different or the same/similar in the other country. The children who had recently migrated were asked to take pictures of what had surprised them, positively or negatively, upon arrival in Italy, because it had been unexpected or different from what they had imagined, or because it had been exactly as imagined.

I gave the young people one full week in which to take the photographs, a time which other authors have indicated as suitable (Clark-Ibáñez, 2007) and which I considered would also ensure that motivation and focus were maintained. After the week was over, the cameras were collected and the films developed. I had two sets of each film printed, one for me and one for the children (Barker and Smith, 2012). However, prior to discussing the photographs with the young participants, I gave each child the set of images I was to keep, and asked them to take away any pictures they did not want me to have or which they did not wish to talk about.

The images the young people had taken formed the framework for subsequent individual interviews. During this one-to-one conversation, the children talked me through the images, telling me why they had chosen a particular subject. Giving the children space in which to explain the reason for choosing particular subjects guaranteed that I would not misinterpret the young people's intention, and that meaning-making rested with the participants rather than the researcher (Pink, 2003; Cook and Hess, 2007). I chose individual interviews for this stage as I thought this would allow the children more privacy to reflect on their images, and that being required to share their photographs with others may be unnerving for the more reserved children. Moreover, I considered that individual interviews would allow for more personal narratives to emerge, serving as a complement to the collective accounts already gathered during the focus groups.

I numbered each photograph in the sets I was to keep, and also coded all the images with the participant's pseudonyms and with sample group and school identifiers. As the exchanges were audio-recorded², I referred to the image's number often during the conversation with the children, in order to be able to recognise, during the transcription stage, which specific photograph we had been discussing. While transcribing, I annotated *verbatim* on the back of each photograph the words the young participants had used to describe the subject of the picture and the reasons why they had chosen it. In this way image and text could be considered as a whole and form an integral unit, the verbal text working both as 'anchorage' to the image, highlighting elements of particular relevance, but also as a 'relay', the starting point of a complementary narrative (Barthes, 1999).

In the next section I will first discuss some of the challenges posed by the photographs during the analysis stage, and I will then outline some points for consideration that do not appear, to the best of my knowledge, to have yet been fully addressed in the available literature. Emphasising the questions and the open issues does, I hope, not diminish the many advantages of participant-led photography as a data collection technique, but rather aims to add further elements to the existing understanding, so that photography may be chosen in full awareness of what it can show but also of what it can obscure.

Keeping within (safe) boundaries

I coded the 584 images taken by the young participants by referring both to the visual element together with the text, then grouped the codes into main themes (Dodman, 2003; Sharples et al., 2003). What appeared immediately striking was the fact that, regardless of the sub-sample, the overwhelming majority of the young participants in Italy had taken photographs of their personal belongings (e.g. clothes, books, toys) home's furnishings and fixtures (e.g. living rooms, beds and lampshades), and of nearby buildings and immediate surroundings. The few images taken outside the house invariably depicted empty streets or details of the urban landscape (e.g. road signs, ornamental fountains, building sites). Only a small proportion of the photographs (i.e. 63 of the 303 images taken by the two sub-samples in Italy) portrayed people and, when they did, these were exclusively of immediate family members or close friends.

Sharples et al. (2003) investigated the topics children choose for their photographs when given a camera and freedom to take any pictures they want. According to the results of this study, young people tend to take pictures of their possessions and the photographs they take do not usually include people, regardless of whether they are taken indoors or outdoors. Sharples et al. (2003) also remark that older children (i.e. 15-year-olds) take more photographs of people. However, the authors also note that these tend to be friends or, as in the case of my study, members of the immediate family. Young people's inclination for taking photographs of each other is also noted by a recent study by

that possessions, home and family are at the heart of young people's interests, as Sharples et al. (2003) suggest. However, I argue that researchers need to consider that children's choices may also be influenced by the desire to avoid taking photographs in public, crowded places where they may attract attention and where their pointing a camera in a public space could result in unwanted questions and comments. While this consideration can be applied to all young people, since specific personality traits, such as shyness, can provoke anxiety and feeling of exposure, it is particularly relevant for children who are from a minority background, and especially so when their being part of a minority group is immediately evident because of the colour of their skin. As noted earlier, the subordinate position that the children of African labour migrants hold in society means that they may be eager not to be noticed. Constantly being in the position of the 'visible other' can be a very straining situation to sustain on a day-to-day basis, and the need to be one amongst many, not to stand out, is evident in 13-year-old Michael's rather unexpected suggestion:

Researcher: right. I see... and say... if you had special powers, and you could do magic, what would you change of Italy to make it better? People, places, objects...

Michael: [laughs] I would change places and people

Researcher: people, places or both?

Michael: both

Researcher: how would you make them better?

Michael: [laughs] I would go to some of the villages and I would build a lot of houses and I would send the black people to stay there. The black villages...

Researcher: pardon?

Michael: black villages [laughs]

Researcher: right! So you would have villages just for black people?

Michael: yes

Researcher: and where are all the white people?

Michael: white people can stay here

Michael's words convey in a startling way the boy's need to be able to fade into the background and stop being the different one. In Italy for a year, Michael was having a difficult time adapting to the perceived or actual instances of racism and prejudice he encountered daily. His suggestion for separate communities divided on the basis of skin colour clearly shows how standing out and being the visibly different one could be a strain for the young people. It is arguable that holding a camera, attracting even more attention through the act of taking photographs in public spaces, could represent a further element of discomfort.

The need to avoid exposing oneself to others' disapproval or curiosity needs to be considered as a potentially important influence in the children's choice of subjects, one which cannot be easily acknowledged, at least not in a research environment. A greater choice of material objects and familiar faces as foci of young people's images may then be misinterpreted as reflecting a lack of interest in the wider social connections and transactions of everyday life. Arguably, the wish *not* to be seen taking pictures in public areas is even more crucial for children who, because of their visible minority status, may be particularly eager to avoid drawing any unnecessary attention. The uncomfortable feeling of being exposed and the object of curiosity or fear, so powerfully conveyed by Michael's suggestion for segregated spaces, was

reiterated by several of the children, as is exemplified by the following exchange between 15-year-old Linelle and 12-year-old Robinson:

Linelle: there's a lady who lives near us, at home. When she opens the door... if she sees that there is someone arriving, she closes...

Robinson: straight away

Linelle: eh, she's scared of Ghanaians

Robinson: of foreigners

Again, the children's words demonstrate how awareness of being 'different', and of this difference being perceived as threat, was a daily occurrence for the children of Ghanaian migrants. Being conspicuous, feeling resented, feared or looked down upon, may have substantially limited young people's willingness to expose themselves by pointing a camera in public spaces. The scarcity of images taken outside the home and immediate surroundings thus may be linked to the anxieties about everyday racism and discrimination that several of the young people reported.

Writing about teenagers' greater propensity to take photographs of their friends, Sharples et al. (2003, 323) note: 'A child brandishing a camera becomes a focus of attention, with friends clustering round pulling faces or adopting poses. The act of photography becomes an enjoyable social event, quite independent of the ensuing photograph'. This was certainly true for the young participants in Ghana, for whom being involved in the study meant being allowed to take photographs within the boarding schools' buildings and grounds, something that was, otherwise, prohibited by school rules, as is exemplified by this conversation with 15-year-old Cynthia:

Researcher: this is a lovely picture... number 10... all this big field here... what is it?

Cynthia: the XX park

Researcher: a beautiful place. And are you allowed to go there when you want?

Cynthia: no. We were allowed to go with the camera, to take the pictures

In sharp contrast to the children in Italy, the images taken by the young people in Ghana portrayed, for the vast majority, people. However, these were almost invariably photos of their peers: in class, playing in the schoolyard, posing against flowery shrubs, or socialising in the dormitories. Inevitably, restrictions to the children's possibility to venture outside the boarding school grounds meant that the young participants' choice of subjects was quite limited. None of the young people, however, commented on this and, when asked to talk me through their photographs during the one-to-one conversations, they simply positioned within the research brief the images they had taken.

The higher concentration, in the photographs taken in Ghana, of specific subjects and settings (i.e. schoolmates and attractive corners of the school grounds) could mean that these were the most significant elements in the young Ghanaian's lives, elements which they were anxious to depict. The choice of subjects this specific group of young participants made may have been affected by the expectations raised by the medium (Änggård, 2015) and by the understanding that a camera is for taking pictures of attractive surroundings and friends. Moreover, the choice needs to be inscribed in the specific West African tradition of self representation and aesthetics

(Peffer and Cameron, 2013) for which which studio portraiture constitutes a means for ‘photographic self-making’ (Fumanti, 2013). However, it is also possible that there were many photographs the children, both in Italy and in Ghana, were prevented from taking because of the particular circumstances in which they found themselves. As Barker and Smith (2012) note, as well as the photographs that participants take there will be other images they are prevented from taking because of the specific limitations that ‘being children’ imposes on them.

The possibility that specific spaces may influence the images taken by young participants needs therefore to be considered when choosing photography as a tool for research. Spatial-emotional boundaries to young people’s choice of subjects for their pictures can be determined by several factors: not wishing to be seen in public places with a camera, as with the children in Italy; using the camera as a pretext to enter into otherwise out-of-bounds areas, as with the children in Ghana; having to deal with limits to the freedom to reach places outside the home, school or immediate surroundings, as with the children both in Italy and Ghana.

While particularly noticeable in the specific context of a Ghanaian boarding school, young people’s limited access was also evident during fieldwork in Italy. Because of the restrictions to unaccompanied travel imposed by age, the young participants in Italy could not easily access spaces beyond the immediate neighbourhood.

Negotiations with adults, including arguments and pleas, are often hidden to the researcher (Barker and Smith, 2012) and only occasionally a glimpse of these may come through, as captured by the words of 13-year-old Slatan³, who had been in Italy for almost four years at the time we met:

Slatan: My mum said ‘Come on, be quiet so when we go out you will be able to take photographs of what is different [in Ghana]’

Not being allowed to go far beyond the immediate neighbourhood, Slatan had to enlist his mother’s help. This had led to a give-and-take negotiation with the adult, who had ultimate say on whether or not the young person would be able to photograph subjects far from the home. It appears that Slatan did manage to keep quiet, as his film held quite a few images taken around the town centre (but devoid of people). This also throws open a question about the influence of other people on the images young people take. This is an important element of the wider debate surrounding the technique. However, these influences do not lie within the scope of this article, and have been acknowledged and discussed elsewhere (e.g. Banks, 2007; Kesby, 2007; Goldstein, 2007; Luttrell and Chalfen, 2010; Barker and Smith, 2012).

The boundaries of children’s time

I chose photography, as illustrated earlier, because I judged it to be a technique that young participants would find more appealing and less school-like and which could be easily mastered. Trying to engage children as active participants may involve the use of practices that run the risk of being too akin to school work, in particular when research is carried out within schools. Writing (e.g. diaries, fiction, biographies) may be a chore for young people, especially when their literacy skills are not very strong or when they are asked to write in a recently acquired language. Drawing and painting are activities that rely on perceived aptitudes and the need to perform, and which may

cause anxiety in children who do not think they are 'good at it' (Punch, 2002). Role-playing and acting can also be daunting for shy people and prolonged periods of adjustment may be needed before some children feel sufficiently at ease to act freely. I judged photography to be an activity with which most young participant would be familiar, less akin to a school task, not as dependent on ideas of ability, and accessible regardless of language abilities. Most importantly, I thought it would appeal to young people and that they would find it more 'fun' than other options (Barker and Weller, 2003; Clark-Ibáñez, 2007; Enright and O'Sullivan, 2009), and thus allow them to be more actively engaged in the research process.

During my last meeting with the young participants, I asked each child to provide some feedback on the activities we had done together in the course of the study: group conversations, photography and one-to-one chats. This led to some thought-provoking insights, some of which challenged my assumptions about the young people's feelings towards photography as a data collection tool. While, with two exceptions, all young people said they had enjoyed the focus-group conversations, photography received decidedly mixed reviews. If not particularly enthusiastic, about half the participants said that they had not minded taking the photographs, as the words of 15 year-old Roberto illustrate:

Researcher: and was it a problem taking the photographs?

Roberto: no, it was ok, it was not a problem

However, the other half of the participants appeared to hold contrasting views. While some children, as it had been hoped, seemed to have had fun taking the photographs,

an equal number had resented the task and had found it to be a chore. The two following extracts, by 12-year-old Benedetta and by 12-year-old Marty respectively, exemplify each position.

Researcher: listen... was it a problem taking the photographs? Did you mind it?

Benedetta: no. It was a pleasure! If you want I'll do some more [laughs]

Researcher: was taking the photographs a problem?

Marty: yes, a bit... because you *had* to have a picture... and you needed to think about it a lot, too.

While the young people had been reassured, during our first meeting, that they were under no obligation to take the cameras, all of them had agreed quite enthusiastically to undertake the task. Arguably, what at first had sounded like a good idea had later turned, at least for some of the young people, into a burden, something they *had* to do in their spare time. This task had required more effort than the young people had anticipated and it had, in some way, interfered with their freedom to carry out other activities. The assumption that photography would be a more fun activity, one that would less resemble schoolwork, was thus put into question by the objections of some of the children. While they were not the majority, it was still a significant enough number to warrant reflection.

Regardless of the tools used (e.g. disposable cameras, digital cameras, camera-phones), asking young people to take photographs according to a research agenda runs the risk of being perceived as an encroachment on the young participants' private

time and space, and thus resented. Acknowledging that for some young people photography may *not* be more ‘fun’ and that it may become burdensome is important for researchers who are considering ways in which to engage young participants, and when choosing techniques that aim to maximise children’s inclusion in the data collection process.

However, it must also be noted that the young people also showed they could protect themselves from the researcher’s intrusion into their free time and from an assignment they had not particularly cared about. Having to remember the task and deciding what subjects to photograph had become for some of the young participants, a chore, and they had resented it. Three participants bypassed the task by taking a whole film of hurried shots in and around the school on the day I was due to collect the cameras.

One other young participant told me the camera had not worked and that as a consequence she had not been able to take any photographs. While it is possible that she had not understood how to operate it, the camera appeared to be in good working order when I tried it, and the possibility that she had simply wished to avoid taking the photographs needs to be considered. Another young girl only took one image, which showed a blue sky with a scattering of clouds. I interpreted this turning of the camera to the most remote of subjects as the girl’s way of keeping the researcher out of her personal space.

These acts of resistance were allowed by the technique, and were one of its most significant positive aspects (Fassetta, 2015). It is arguable that children would have been much less able to avoid the adult’s demands in the case of other data collection techniques which require the researcher’s presence. Being able to take photographs

away from the investigator allowed spaces for resistance and defiance which would otherwise have been much less likely.

Conclusion

This paper considered ways in which photography in research can carry some issues that have yet to be fully recognised and discussed by the literature focusing on this specific technique. As Back (2009) argues, it is necessary for a photograph to be contextualised in order '[...] to avoid a naïve realism that conceals its social staging' (Back, 2009, 480). The process of contextualisation cannot ignore the positionality of the photographer and the relative lack of power of some categories within society. On the contrary, it needs to consider the effects of power imbalance on the photographers' freedom to choose subjects for their images if it is to avoid 'naïve realism'. When those taking photographs are children and young people, their subordinate - and hence more exposed - status within society, as well as constraints over the extent of their independent movement, need to be factored in. Assuming that the subject of an image simply reflects the interest of the young photographers can obscure the dynamics that may inhibit young people from venturing out of familiar areas to point a camera at other people or objects, running the risk of being scolded, teased or ridiculed. It is also easy to see how the visible minority status of young participants means that the deceptively simple act of aiming a camera in public requires a degree of self-assurance that not many will possess. Additionally, children's dependence on adults to gain access to people and places that lie outwith the confines of home, immediate neighbourhood and school, further limits young people's choice of subjects.

A further point for reflection concerns researchers' assumptions about what young people may enjoy and what may result in their greater involvement. The expectation that photography is more 'fun' and more engaging needs to be considered in the light of children's own evaluations and in the light of changing attitudes and practices towards image-making. As my experience showed, while some children will enjoy taking photographs for a research project, young people's enthusiasm is neither a given nor ubiquitous. As Barker and Weller (2003) note, child-centred research is not just the product of a specific technique, and 'participation' cannot be brought into being simply by choosing particular methodologies. While it is important to offer as many instruments as possible for children's points of view to emerge, being openly reflective about the opportunities but also the limits of particular techniques is essential in order not to conceal imbalance of power behind tokenistic interventions.

However, photography is an invaluable tool for research that needs careful planning and reflexive consideration to ensure that its many advantages are strengthened and its challenges openly acknowledged and factored into the research process. Giving cameras to small groups of children, for example, can encourage the important conversations that lie behind an image to emerge while, at the same time, allowing young participants the sense of security that comes from being in a group. This could encourage young people to choose subjects that are important to them even if they lie outwith their immediate social circle and familiar surroundings. This will also have the added benefit of giving visibility to the 'multivocal' nature of photography, surrendering the pretense of capturing a singular intention. Moreover, group activities, as the young people in my project stated, are usually more enjoyable for their social

nature and because they put less pressure on the individual performance, and thus more likely to result in greater engagement. Of course, choosing group photography may not suit projects that aim to collect more personal, intimate narratives, and, like all research techniques, the use of group versus individual photography will need to be carefully assessed on the basis of the specific research questions and of ethical considerations.

The field of photography is changing fast, and the advent of camera-phones and photo-sharing apps and websites may yet change the way in which this technology can be exploited in order to involve young people more actively in the research process. Taking photographs is now a ubiquitous activity, and camera-phones are less conspicuous and more commonplace than big plastic disposable cameras. However, apart from issues around the use of participants' own equipment, and the problems this may cause if damaged or stolen in the course of a research project, many of the issues linked to other photographic mediums still pertain. Children may resent taking photographs 'on demand', may begrudge having to do this in their free time, may face restrictions to their movements which limit the range of the photographs they can take. Finally, whatever the medium, the choice of subjects for photographs still depends on unspoken rules that children may not feel happy to break. While 'selfies' are ubiquitous, pointing a camera-phone at others can still have consequences (questions, puzzled looks, mockery) that young people may not be prepared to risk.

Photography may not *per se* ensure young people's active participation to a research project, it does not guarantee we will see the world 'through children's eyes', and it is not necessarily 'fun'. Further research is needed to add to our understanding of the

ways in which young people interpret the role of photography in research and how they understand it; how they assess this tool, and how they experience it; and which are the practical and emotional limitations they face, also in relation to their gendered, classed and/or racialised belonging. Improved understanding of these issues can contribute to inform a more transparent approach to the analysis and interpretation of visual data, and maximise photography's potential to actively include young people's experiences and reflections in social research.

Endnotes

¹ For readability purposes, the terms 'children' and 'young people' are used as synonymous, in the awareness that there are objective and important differences which are determined by chronological age as well as geographical and historical specificities. Following the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) definition of a 'child' as '[...] every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier' the term child will refer to people of seventeen years or younger. In order to contextualise the young participants' responses, however, the precise age will be stated when quoting them.

² In Ghana the conversations were in English, Ghana's official language. In Italy the conversation were held mostly in Italian, although a few children who had arrived very recently preferred to communicate in English. In this case, the conversations were translated concurrently to the transcription.

³ The names used throughout this article are pseudonyms the young people chose for themselves.

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