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Visual Methods in the Social Sciences: Refugee Background Young People

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Abstract: This article discusses visual research methods trialled with young African background refugees. We suggest here that visual methods offer a useful means of accessing the lives of minority young people, because they resonate with the visually mediated culture they are already familiar with and do not rely entirely on linguistic capacity. Visual methods are thus generative and able to secure participant interest and commitment amongst a group who may not be comfortable with traditional interview or focus group methods. The article observes that visual methods have until recently been neglected in the social sciences, and when they are applied it is often with the intention of undertaking semiotic or discourse analysis. Although the project discussed in this article was initiated with the intention of pursuing this analytical direction, we found that other rewards were to be gained from using visual methods. We discuss the project's unanticipated research directions and its ethical challenges. The article closes by arguing that the reluctance of social science researchers to use visual methods are as much related to the historical development of qualitative research and the efforts of the social sciences to align themselves with empiricism and science, as with the specific limits and challenges of the approach.

Keywords: Visual Methods, Visual Research, Refugee Background Young People, Globalisation, Resilience

Introduction

CONTEMPORARY CULTURE IS saturated with visual images (Sturken and Cartwright 2001; Barnard 2001). Although visual images play a meaningful role in the lives of young people, the social sciences have been slow to engage with visual methods and are poorly informed about their value and limitations.

This article discusses the Narrating Our World (NOW) project and its use of visual methods to generate insights about the schooling experience of refugee background students in Australia. Many young African refugees arrive in Australia with limited English language skills and yet are familiar with the visual images that appear in photographs, films, advertisements, the internet and television. We suggest that visual methods of data collection resonate with the visual context and experience of refugee young people and thus have the capacity to secure participant involvement, interest, and facilitate communication across difference. They are thus able to engage minority young people who may be reticent to participate in interviews and focus groups due to their limited command of English.

The article opens with an argument for visual methods in the context of a study of refugee young people. This section identifies the value of an approach able to take into account the

experience of those who have had global mobility foisted upon them. After discussing NOW project methods and processes we detail ethical challenges and their implication for visual research. The article closes with an explanation for the neglect of visual methods in qualitative research suggesting that the oversight is not simply a consequence of their intrinsic limits and challenges but the historical ascendancy of science. Unlike quantitative approaches, qualitative research does not automatically assume that textual representations produce faithful mirror-like reflections of the world. All texts, be they numerical, written or visual, have the capacity to generate new meaning beyond the intent of the producers of data and the objects they seek to depict (Bolt 2004). Attending to intrinsic, contextual in-process aspects of data generation and analysis acknowledges the fundamental indeterminacy of research practice.

Global Times

Globalisation has been described as connecting distant locations through new networks and social relations to change people's perceptions of space and locality (Castells 1997). National borders become porous as barriers to mobility dwindle and the importance of nation states diminish. Researching refugees in global times requires an approach able to reach into people's lives and apprehend the complexity of multiple locatedness and non-western cultural and intellectual heritage (Alasuutari 2004). With this in mind the NOW project sought a methodological approach able to grasp the relationship of refugee experience to the local experience of education.

We realised that the involuntary migration experience of African refugee young people made for a markedly different experience of education. It is significantly different to the educational experience of voluntary migrants and non-English speaking background students from Europe and Asia, with whom teachers and schools were more familiar. Visual methods appeared to us to offer refugee young people an opportunity to speak about their lives in a way that did not overlay the specificities of their experience with previous expectations and the general themes of contemporary social theory. Dominant issues in globalisation theory concern border-crossing, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, global citizenship, and the demise of cultural and national distinctions and these are not entirely relevant to the situation of refugee young people. For obvious reasons, many young refugee people did not want to represent themselves in ethnic, cultural or national terms. Neither were they interested in generating accounts of themselves as victims of inadequate educational and resettlement regimes. As detailed below, visual methods enabled refugee young people to demonstrate their resilience, their enjoyment of their new lives, and their capacity to appropriate youth culture to their own ends.

Visual methods utilise the new technologies of global times; technologies that have facilitated mobility, global connectivity and people's perceptions of these. However they do not rely on familiarity with technical language and concepts to denote such conditions. They can thus engage theoretical analysis at local and specific levels such that the arguments and insights of globalisation and postcolonial theory might be supported or challenged. For instance our consideration of refugee mobility in the lives of refugee young people led us to see that the deterritorialisation commonly associated with globalisation does not straightforwardly transcend national identity and nation-statism. We noted that receiving countries such as Australia simultaneously reterritorialise the nation through border protection policies

intended to prevent refugees and asylum seekers mobility (Mares 2002). These mesh with socio-cultural and economic practices to intensify nationalism and fear of the 'other' (Bauman 1998). Since global times are marked by growing hostility and negative perceptions about the potentially threatening and dangerous risk posed by refugees, asylum seekers and 'strangers' (Castells 1997), it is all the more necessary to understand accounts of the world generated by those targeted by such discourses.

The NOW project discussed in this article was one component of a larger project entitled *Schooling, Globalisation and Refugees in Queensland*. The project sought to investigate how policies, schools and local communities met the educational needs of young refugees. Project data were also gleaned from interviews and focus groups with teachers, school principals, guidance officers, liaison officers and youth workers, and policy makers in the education, government and community sector.

The Narrating Our World (NOW) Project

The NOW project ran for two hours once a week over five weeks and involved fourteen volunteer newly arrived refugee students enrolled at state high schools in Australia. Eight participants were Liberian, three were Sudanese and individual participants were from Ethiopia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone. African refugees come from Sudan via refugee camps in Egypt and Kenya, their English tends to be limited and their schooling interrupted. Liberian young people are more comfortable conversing in English. The project was conducted in a youth space by a researcher and research assistant both of whom had previous experience working with minority, migrant and refugee young people.

Most of the young people had previously attended the homework support programme run by the Queensland Program of Assistance for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (QPASTT). Researchers worked with the young people after school in the QPASTT youth space. The project trialled three forms of visual communication: digital photography, drawing and painting, and sand tray. The sand tray activity involved placing miniature figurines of people, animals, houses, water, bridges, fences and so on, into a tray of sand to create stories and served as an interesting point of comparison with the other media (Ramirez and Matthews 2008). The sand tray and miniature images were made available in the youth space. Participants borrowed digital cameras and were given scrapbooks and coloured pencils.

We chose visual methods because we realised that interviews and focus groups conducted in English were inadequate to capture the experience of refugee young people with limited English language proficiency (Young and Barrett 2001), and felt that visual methods would more effectively elicit information and generate understanding about the educational experiences of refugee background young people. Participants were divided into three groups to use the sandtray, photography and drawing/painting on a rotational basis each week. Stories and imagery were explored through guided thematic discussions to generate personal reflections on school life. Discussions were guided only to the extent that they sought to retain a focus on the experience of schooling. Discussion themes included: my friends, fun places, unfriendly places, powerful people, difficult people, my hopes for the future, and a perfect school. By far the most popular themes were my friends and fun places.

Of the three media trialled, photography proved to be particularly generative. Indeed, we had difficulty capping the number of photographs participants produced and wanted to talk about. Painting was popular but participants were reticent to display their work to the whole

group. The use of sand tray was an innovation that has not to our knowledge been used as an applied method of sociological research; the medium is commonly used by psychologists in therapeutic settings. Those using the sand tray produced a collaborative story, and we found that it stimulated discussion in small groups with limited communication skills in English. Sand has a tactile attraction and participants liked to run it between their fingers and move it around the tray, the figures were able to stand for a broad range of matters, and discussions about what they could or should represent were insightful.

Figure One: Sand Tray

Photo-elicitation methodologies commonly introduce photographs into research interviews to obtain information (Harper 2002). They differ from photo-voice approaches which use photographs to encourage minority groups and communities to communicate their experiences and concerns in order to facilitate change (Tilbury 2006). We had intended to undertake a photo-voice approach which sought to promote understanding of the needs of refugee background students while at the same time stimulating the development resources and pedagogies with a group who were struggling with English language. We expected the project to generate narratives about school life and anticipated that the visual approach would generate useful resources for teachers, as well as a pedagogical process that developed listening and speaking skills and promoted understanding between refugee young students and others. Unfortunately however, our plan to run the project in a school environment had to be revised because teachers were concerned about the demands of the project on student time. We subsequently ran the project in a youth space and modified our approach to produce individual and group accounts and narratives utilising a creative process (Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006, p. 84). The voluntary nature of participation in the project meant that sessions were more spontaneous than anticipated. The same participants did not attend all the sessions and this made it difficult to keep track of concurrent activities and discussions.

We also expected to generate photographic images, artwork and narrative accounts that would be analysed through semiotic and/or discourse analysis, and related to choice and use of objects, artefacts, aesthetic preferences, role models and events. The images and discussion did not lend themselves to this type of analysis, first because participants presented many

more than the five photographs we originally requested, and second because group discussions conducted at the beginning of each session moved in all kinds of unpredictable directions and it was not always easy to link discussion themes back to images. We were also intrigued by the fact that participants were more interested in talking about places where they felt happy, comfortable and safe, than unfriendly places, difficult people, or aspirations for the future and for schools. This was all the more interesting in light of points raised by education and community personnel and detailed at length in educational research literature. This material observed that refugee students were struggling at school and that many needed trauma counselling.

We expected photographic images, artwork and narrative accounts to deliver negative accounts of traumatic pre-settlement experience, as well as the trials of post-settlement. Instead we received images and accounts of full, busy and happy post-settlement lives. By way of explanation, one student observed that it was precisely because schooling was not enjoyable for many refugee young people that they did not want to dwell on it. In addition, they learnt less at school, than at home, in communities, churches and with friends. While the research process proceeded in unanticipated directions, the images and insights we gained provided a valuable counterpoint to abundant portrayals of refugees as authentic victims of trauma and figures of compassion, suffering and misery (Wright 2002, see also Langton 2008).

Reflecting on the Research Process

We realised that participants were less concerned with telling us and one another about the trials and tribulations of school, than in the opportunity to meet people with similar experiences. We learnt that refugee young people had few opportunities to meet one another. Their involvement in the purposeful activities of the project facilitated social interaction and enabled them to overcome the social isolation of a group who, apart from sharing the label 'refugee', were from different cultural and language backgrounds, of different ages, and with different levels of English language competence. Participants came into contact with young people they might not have otherwise met to develop friendships, feel a sense of belonging, gain a sense of respect and to have fun (Ramirez and Matthews 2008).

Although the project was unable to undertake the formal semiotic analysis it intended, it nevertheless generated 'findings'. For instance we found that participants did not dwell in the trauma of their pre-settlement experience or their seemingly unsurmountable struggles at school, but lived their lives to the full and exhibited a resilience that has not been fully examined or accounted for in contemporary theories of cultural identity (Bhabha 1994; Hall 1992). The concept of resilience is familiar in social psychological explanations (Anderson 2003), but such accounts pay more attention to individual development than socio-cultural activities. Cultural studies scholarship discusses the new ethnicities and hybrid identities born of migration and diaspora (Bhabha 1994; Hall 1992). Visual methods enable us to better understand the resilience borne of the cultural and political conditions of refugee experience.

Visual methods have the capacity to facilitate communication across difference. Despite differences of age, sex, ethnicity, class, culture and language, participants and researchers communicated in discussions about the meaning of various images and these discussions enabled shared understandings of lives and experiences. For example we learnt that the boys were fascinated by rap culture and gangsta rappers such as *50 Cent*. Photo after photo depicted

the baggy clothes, caps, and stances of rap culture. These signs and symbols were not simply a matter of fashion, style, good music or the glorification of American or Black-American culture; rather they represented the triumph of survivors. The young people told us that they enjoyed rap because rap stars were rich and powerful. We also learnt that the girls tolerated rap, but were not altogether happy with its sexism and the boy's neglect of African popular music. Bhabha (1994, p. 224) suggests that the liminality of migrant experience is precisely how 'newness' emerges in transgressive acts of cultural translation that secure survival. While this is certainly the case, it seemed to us that the in-between condition of refugee boys generates a problematic and gendered form of 'newness'. The appropriation of American rap culture may well direct them in a way that furthers educational underachievement and alienation from wider society (Matthews 2008).

In short, for these young people visual methods facilitated communication through shared engagement, enjoyment and participation in a creative activity. They were able to include those who were less familiar with English language and thereby facilitate mutual respect. Communication was not reliant on instant language-based questions and answers; it evolved in response to visual artefacts or during their production. Importantly, visual methods generated insights into people's lives and experience. Visual methods are not frivolous or less relevant to policy development than interviews or large scale surveys often deemed necessary to influence policy. Indeed with forced migrants, research concerned with measurements can end up advancing technical interventions that address symptoms and obscure the politically uncomfortable origins and causes of problems (Rodgers 2004). In the case of refugee students in Australia, technical solutions tend to focus on the provision of individual counselling, settlement support services, and funding for English language teachers (Taylor 2009; Matthews 2008). While these are important, they tend to be additive and do not address the ways schools, curricula and pedagogy alienate refugee young people, rather than build on resilience to facilitate a sense of community and belonging.

Ethical Issues

Unfortunately we were unable to exhibit many of the images produced by participants on the project website. The reasons for this are a matter of some concern if visual methods are to be more widely adopted. Australian universities adhere to the guidelines for the conduct of ethical research as defined by the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) which requires that the identity of all research participants remains anonymous; and that any published information is not attributable to any identifiable individual thereby meeting the requirement for confidentiality as determined by ethics guidelines. We had intended to publish images of the work produced during project activities in journal articles and on the project website. However the requirement for anonymity prohibited publication or public display of any photographs depicting participants. We were however able to use photographs taken by participants of family, friends, teachers and bystanders provided they were accompanied by the signed consent of those people depicted in the photo.

Similar constraints were described by Riley and Manias (2003) who sought to generate images taken by hospital patients. While photographs are routinely used in normal clinical practice with little regulation, the use of images in hospital based research must adhere to strict research ethics guidelines (Riley and Manias 2003). Interestingly, we found that newspapers, universities and schools routinely publish recognisable pictures of students and

their creative work (Kaplan and Howes 2004). To address the problem we asked participants to take photos without showing people's faces. While some darkened people's faces, many returned with recognisable pictures of themselves, friends and family. To show us their lives, they needed to show people, and recognition and visibility were integral to this process. Problematically, darkened faces 'blackened' out the gaze and served to dehumanise, objectify and racialise the photographic image. It thus reinforced the invisibility of research participants and 'undid' their efforts to locate themselves as creative agents and active research subjects. We found ourselves in a 'stuck place' because we could not represent students in the ways they sought to represent (Lather 2006). By way of a partial solution we organised a session which trained participants to remaster the photographs. While the session produced aesthetically interesting results (see Figure 2 below), and demonstrated how quickly the students were able to grasp the technicalities of Paintshop, the remastered images were unable to replicate the impressions students had initially wanted to deliver.

Figure 2: Remastered Image

While the project gave students access to technologies and other resources which enabled them to re-present and subvert negative images and narratives of themselves and their families, the strictures of research ethics concerning anonymity (Komesaroff 1999, p. 65) meant that the project limited participant's capacity to challenge dominant victim-orientated narratives of refugees.

A final ethical dilemma concerned the issue of 'findings', analysis and interpretation. Certainly visual research methods enabled students to engage in the production and sharing of meaningful narratives about things that were important in their lives. However, to some extent the world they narrated could be regarded as a form of denial or a means of coping with the negative stereotypes of African refugee students circulating at school and elsewhere, and the minutiae of their ongoing struggles with racism and inadequate schooling provision. The world narrated by students was at odds with the world of racism, frustration and alienation

described by education and community professionals. On the one hand we felt obliged to underline the youthful pleasure and enjoyment the students spoke of, on the other hand we felt the need to supplement their accounts (Ramirez and Matthews 2008; Matthews 2008). We came to see that it was not enough to speak of findings alone because they required reflection on the nature of their production and their relationship to the local and global context of schooling and refugee background students.

Visual Research in the Social Sciences

In this final section we investigate the development and application of visual methods in the social sciences. Visual research involves the use of images such as photographs, advertisements and film in data production and analysis to generate detailed, insightful and meaningful knowledge. Visual images can be *generated* as in visual ethnography, documentary film or the production of photographs in photo elicitation, or *compiled and collected* as in studies of advertisements, media representations, graffiti, websites, artefacts, and spatial arrangements. The versatility of visual research is such that it can be approached from entirely different epistemological perspectives. Visual ethnographies, visual narratives and photographic portrayal are based in empiricism and the view that the world can and should be objectively observed to generate knowledge, while photo elicitation approaches are based in phenomenology and the idea that experience generates reflections, perceptions and categories for analysis and knowledge generation (Harper 1998).

Despite their versatility and potential for wide scale application, visual methods have been largely neglected in the social sciences. We want to suggest that this is as much to do with the historical development of qualitative research and the efforts of the social sciences to align themselves with empiricism and science, as with intrinsic flaws in visual methods. Photography, anthropology and sociology are closely related and originated in the late 19th century. They were all interested in documenting the social conditions of the day however sociology and anthropology took a scientific turn to become less overtly political (Becker 2006; 1995). Photography came to be regarded as imbuing a political and ideological purpose and was used to pursue social welfare and reform agendas, as well as provide evidence of racial classification and cultural superiority. The idea that photographic images had both the capacity to faithfully replicate the reality they sought to depict, and as well being open to manipulation (Prosser and Warburton 1999) derives from its dual imperative; the ‘crusading spirit’ of early photojournalism (Becker 1995) and the colonising drive to categorise and hierarchalise.

Photographs and film used in anthropology and sociology managed to sidestep major dispute until the 1980s linguistic turn in anthropology which argued that at the same time as seeking to see through ‘their’ eyes and represent and reveal the realities of ‘their’ world and culture, the genre of ethnographic writing obscured the authorial presence of the researcher giving the appearance of objectivity (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford 1988). The 1990s marked an era of intense self reflection about the profound contradictions of representational practices which sought to give voice while at the same time replicating master narratives (Lather 2006). Debates about the ambiguous and polysemic nature of data (Lather 2006) set the stage for research that expected all ‘text’, in the sense of signifying structures comprising speech, writing and visuals, to be unreliable (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001). Context and researcher subjectivity came to the fore in methodological discussions, first because it was

recognised that viewers brought different symbolic associations to images and context was necessary to understanding, and second because image production, use and analysis relied on researcher reflexivity, sensitivity and awareness (Mason 1984). In the social sciences, such discussions encouraged researchers to turn to experimental and postcolonial approaches which worked within and against textual limits (see Lather 2006). In education, studies informed by postcolonial theory paid close attention to the cultural politics, negotiations and power struggles of hybrid racialised and sexualized subjects (see Matthews 1998; Singh and Dooley 2001).

This work underlined the point that data are not just information that researchers collect for later analysis; rather data comprises culturally, historically and theoretically informed interpretations. They are the product of researchers and participants in situated contexts and generate resources and information which only in analysis becomes recognised as evidence. Likewise, photographs and visual images capture information which is transformed into an object of reflection. Images are neither the empirical representation of objects nor the creative imaginings of individual consciousness (Buck-Morss 2004, p. 22), rather the meanings of photographs arise in the context of their use through joint interactions, and the understandings of people who use and attribute meaning to them (Becker 1995, p. 5). Visual images are thus not of themselves data since like field notes, documents, interviews and artefacts, they are the product of social interactions. Indeed it can be argued that the very notion of data is itself untenable because:

There are no 'pure', 'raw' data, uncontaminated by human thought and action, and the significance of data depends on how material fits into the architecture of corroborating data (Freeman et al. 2007, p. 27)

Data comprise of cultural, historical and theoretical interpretations made by participants and researchers. Thus, what researchers collect are not of themselves data, but resources for data:

Data and information are not evidence until two things happen: first, someone recognizes it as data, and second, an inquirer subjects it to some systematic analysis, which turns it into evidence directed toward some question or argument (Lincon 2002, p. 6 cited in Freeman et al. 2007, p. 27).

If we mistake image/data for the objects they seek to represent, then any manipulation of the image implies that we have acted deceptively to malign the object. The point for Buck-Morss (2004) is not that we must pin down once and for all meaning using analysis to generate a powerful narrative that stays put in every place and space, but instead to appreciate the capacity of images to 'generate meaning, and not merely to transmit it' (Buck-Morss 2004, p. 23).

Conclusion

This article has argued that visual methods resonate with the cultural resources and background of young refugees. In particular we note that visual methods are able to attend both to the indeterminacy of meaning generation, and global, political and cultural contexts.

Our efforts to understand schooling in the lives of refugee young people generated unanticipated results. Against conclusions drawn in other contexts, we found that young people preferred to speak about the positive aspects of their lives and came to the conclusion that this was indicative of their response to negative aspects of schooling and their resilience. We further noted that a number of ethical matters are still to be clarified in relation to visual research with minority young people. Finally, we argued that the neglect of visual methods in the social sciences has less to do with the uncertainties of the methods themselves than the historical ascendancy of science. Visual methods offer the social sciences unique methodological tools; these include the ability to engage with both uniqueness and consistency (Freeman et al. 2007) as well as innovations that allow for puzzlement and the sociological imagination (Alasuutari 2004, p. 604).

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