Article Title Page

Visual ethnography and refugee women: Nuanced understandings of lived experiences

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose: This paper aims to reinforce the significance of visual ethnography as a tool for mental health promotion.

Design/Methodology/approach: Visual ethnography has become an established methodology particularly in qualitative studies, to understand specific themes within participants' everyday realities. Beyond providing a visual element, such methods allow for meaningful and nuanced explorations of sensitive themes, allowing richer sets of data to emerge rather than focussing on conversations alone. The participants in this study evaluated how far they had come by exploring complex circumstances using visual ethnographic means.

Findings: Research with single refugee women in Brisbane, Australia, demonstrates how discussing photographs and creating digital movies yielded a sense of achievement, pride and accomplishment, health and wellbeing, and ownership for some women, while for others it was a burden.

Originality/value: Studies with single refugee women have been scarce with limited use of visual ethnographic methods. Visual ethnography is particularly suited to understanding refugee narratives, as complex experiences are not always conveyed through textual representations alone.

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Keywords: Visual ethnography; single refugee women; digital storytelling; photovoice; photo-elicitation; mental health.

Article Classification: Research paper

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Visual ethnography and refugee women: Nuanced understandings of lived experiences.

Introduction

Visual ethnographic methods in qualitative research can help researchers explore the nuances of people's lived realities (for instance, Gubrium, 2009; McIntyre, 2003). Proponents of the increasingly popular visual-based methods argue that complex experiences cannot be fully conveyed through textual interpretations alone (Pink, 2006, 2007; Radnofsky, 1996). Further, visual methods induce more critical, reflexive methodologies (Pink, 2006), as interpretations of emerging data from participants' perspectives provide a comprehensive and enriching exploration of the social worlds of both researcher and participants. They also promote more collaborative methodologies than used in the past, as such methods involve the active involvement of both researchers and participants rather than, for example, passive involvement of participants in research based on observation (Pink, 2006). The challenge for visual ethnographers is to reach a text-image balance in analysing and reporting findings (Radnofsky, 1996). The additional depth visual-based methods brings to qualitative research signifies the need to consider their broader implications. In relation to refugee women's narratives, visual methodological approaches may assist researchers to highlight knowledge on resilience and pathways to wellbeing through representations of their everyday experiences.

The vast array of issues single refugee women face in Australia, paired with responsibilities they bear as sole parents, means that this group is largely disadvantaged and marginalised (National Council for Single Mothers and their Children [NCSMC], 2009). Life stories of single refugee women remain hidden from

public spheres, with scarce attention given to this subgroup. Despite the distinct set of challenges such women face, they are also capable of making the most of opportunities afforded by their new context. Nevertheless, perspectives on these women's resilience remain relatively sparse (see for instance, Lenette, Brough & Cox, 2012). The 'refugee' term often overlooks distinctive stories and circumstances beyond preconceived classifications, meaning that women's social worlds can be examined out of context. Thus, engaging research participants ethically and contextually are essential to building deeper understandings and informing practice frameworks (Hugman, Pittaway, & Bartolomei, 2011; see also Bettie, 2003). The use of visual ethnography provides an excellent avenue for context-based research, and the implications of this methodological approach should therefore be discussed further.

This paper shows how the effective use of visual ethnographic methods with a small group of single refugee women (divorced or widowed) yielded key information in the context of mental health research. The findings are drawn from a larger ethnographic study the researcher (first author) conducted in 2008 and 2009, seeking emic perspectives on resilience and wellbeing among single refugee women resettled in Brisbane, Australia. The broader study's outcomes have already been reported (Lenette et al., 2012). The visual ethnographic aspect of fieldwork included three stages: photovoice, photo-elicitation, and digital storytelling. The current paper focuses on the suitability of these methods to explore refugee women's lived realities in more depth, thus yielding nuanced understandings of their social worlds. It discusses the strengths of visual ethnography as an appropriate tool for research with refugee women, and documents the emergence of stories of agency, resilience and wellbeing through the use of this methodology.

Framed by an intersectional lens with its roots in feminism, the findings demonstrate the complexity of refugee women's lives, and challenge the assumption of a universal female experience. An intersectional approach combined with visual ethnographic research seems to be particularly innovative, as this approach seemed to be absent in the authors' review of the literature on visual ethnography and intersectional theory. While there is a long history of ethnographic explorations of refugee experiences (for instance, Gilad, 1990; Hoffman & Lubkemann, 2005; Naidoo, 2008), this qualitative study adds to the existing body of knowledge on refugees that specifically values socio-cultural contexts. An anthropological account thus avoids an ethnocentric approach to mental health constructs in relation to refugee women.

The central themes, conveyed through visual ethnography, are not only significant to yield nuanced understandings of resilience and wellbeing, but also in terms of the research process itself. More specifically, findings around (i) a sense of achievement, pride and accomplishment, and (ii) a sense of health and wellbeing, add a rich dimension to refugee women's resilience and wellbeing discourses. Concurrently, findings on (iii) a sense of ownership, and (iv) a sense of burden, provide important points for consideration when undertaking qualitative research with refugee women. Such themes can better inform research initiatives in a similar context and encourage researchers to consider a wider range of implications in relation to visual ethnographic methods.

Approach to engaging in visual ethnographic research

The approach to this study was informed by the researcher's interest in refugee women, which stems from past experiences as a human service professional in the multicultural field in Brisbane, Australia. As a new migrant to this country, the

researcher is part of a diverse minority and has developed a subjective understanding of migration and resettlement issues. This subjective positioning enabled the researcher to establish strong relationships of trust with participating women to explore lived realities using visual ethnography. The researcher's intent was to highlight the multiple challenges and opportunities single refugee women encounter in resettlement, and demonstrate the women's sense of agency and ingenious abilities to navigate tensions yielded in everyday life.

Intersectionality

This study adopted an intersectional approach, allowing in-depth exploration of socio-cultural determinants of resilience, wellbeing and mental health. By challenging assumptions that there is a universal and collective experience as women, intersectionality acknowledges that “feminist efforts are simultaneously embedded and woven into the efforts against racism, classism, and other threats to their access to equal opportunities and social justice” (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008, p. 5). Across the globe, “women, more than men, are subjected to double or multiple manifestations of human rights violations” (Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001, p. 23). Thus, intersectionality, firmly grounded in feminist philosophy, is often represented using a metaphor of a ‘road map’ where different axes of oppression intersect and weave together to create a compound effect on the lives of women situated in the centre (Bartolomei, Pittaway, & Pittaway, 2003; Yuval-Davis, Anthias, & Kofman, 2005). It is the researcher's role to interpret experiences of intersectionality by making the implicit explicit (Bowleg, 2008). Intersectionality acknowledges the compound effect of interconnected issues such as gender, age, socioeconomic status or religion, as opposed to aggregating them. An intersectional approach highlights how complexity and embeddedness can be better understood by considering compound effects created

by a range of factors (Bartolomei et al., 2003; Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001). The applicability of intersectionality theory is indicative of the density and interconnected nature of issues faced by single refugee women, and demonstrates the need for an equally complex understanding.

Ethnography

Although ethnography is traditionally the domain of social anthropologists, it has come to be used more widely in the social sciences as a means of researchers immersing themselves in participants' lived realities, to develop familiarity with norms, practices and socio-cultural contexts that cannot be obtained from other more commonly used methodologies (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Skeggs, 2001; Van Maanen, 1988; 2006). Researchers seek to not only "observe and study the modes of life of a culture" (Holloway & Wheeler, 1996, p. 83), but in contemporary ethnography, they also absorb data through 'engaged listening' (Gerard Forsey, 2011). This process is no longer limited to isolated, distinct cultural groups, but extends to multiple sites and cultures, with greater participant engagement and collaboration (Van Maanen, 2006). Thus, ethnographic research allows for multiple and alternative interpretations in describing socio-cultural experiences, acknowledging multiple realities (Fetterman, 1998; Skeggs, 2001). Over time, ethnography has developed to encompass a broad range of methods and approaches including, amongst others, visual and sensory ethnography (Sunderland et al., in press; Harper, 2003; Pink 2009, 2011; Van Maanen, 2006).

Why visual ethnography?

Visual ethnography or visual anthropology is a sub-field of cultural anthropology, aiming to document visual representations of lived experiences. Its feminist

underpinnings ensure that “knowledge is produced not about but for women” in a collaborative, empowering manner that ensures participants are able to represent and understand their experiences through their world view rather than that often depicted in the media (Pink, 2007, p. 111). As Skeggs (2001, p. 43) states, ethnography provides "an excellent methodology for feminists, with its emphasis on experience and the words, voice and lives of the participants".

Visual ethnography is becoming increasingly popular amongst qualitative researchers, particularly in cross-cultural studies, for several reasons. Firstly, visual anthropologists contend that “some elements of human experience are best represented visually, and that the visual brings the fieldwork experience directly to the context of representation” (Pink, 2006, p. 16). Anthropologists, in particular, thus increasingly seek to combine texts and images in research endeavours (Pink, 2006). Secondly, visual anthropology can embrace a broader sensory ethnographic approach – an 'anthropology of the senses' (Pink, 2006), which can create comprehensive understandings of the relationships between health, wellbeing and place (Sunderland et al., in press). The role of the researcher immersed in settings thus encompasses richer dimensions as more senses can be involved. Thirdly, this methodology is often cathartic and empowering for participants (Riley & Manias, 2004), as it allows participants to document their experiences from their perspectives (McIntyre, 2003) and can thus promote a sense of agency. Fourthly, cultural narratives traditionally ignored by mainstream discourses can be revealed, as performed behaviours and stereotypical roles are displayed through visual means (Chappell, Chappell, & Margolis, 2011). Fifthly, in visual ethnography, gender is central to the research content and process, as the fluid nature of visual methods ensures the multiplicity of participants’ identities is acknowledged (Pink, 2001; Skeggs, 2001). It thus lends

itself well to feminist and post-structural research. Hence, visual ethnography enriches interpretations of emerging data to provide nuanced explorations of lived realities.

Participants

Using the snowball technique, eight women from refugee backgrounds were initially recruited purposively, irrespective of countries of origin, visa categories, time spent in Australia, and language proficiency. The only basis for selection was self-identification as refugee or humanitarian entrant. The deliberate flexibility in criteria was to avoid excluding potential participants. The researcher's experience in the local multicultural field facilitated the establishment of pragmatic connections to access and work with refugee women. Four participants were actively involved in local communities and worked in the multicultural field as community advocates or liaison persons with government. The other women had limited engagement in the public arena. All eight participants lived with children and dependents in rental accommodation. Seven out of eight women were from African nations, yet were diverse in cultural affiliations and heritage, life experiences and circumstances. The visual ethnographic projects discussed in this paper only involved three women (details summarised below) who were willing and able to actively participate in this data collection phase. The limited participation is discussed under the theme 'Sense of burden' in the findings section.

Table 1: Information on participants.

Participant/ number of interviews	Country of origin	Time in Aust. (yrs.)	Marital status	English language abilities	Educational level/ employment status	Number of children / dependents	Age

#1 (Mila*) 9 interviews	Sudan	5	Widow	Excellent	University / part time work in community development, full time university student	5 children	Late 30s
#2 (Thara*) 7 interviews	Sudan	2	Widow	Excellent	University / full time work in community development	5 children	40s
#3 (Sonia*) 7 interviews	Burundi	2	Divorced	Limited	Vocational / unemployed, unpaid community work	7 children + 3 dependents	Mid-50s

* Pseudonyms.

Ethical clearance was granted from a Human Research Ethics Committee, in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. The purpose of this study was not simply to establish differences and similarities among these women, but to appreciate how these were connected in complex and intricate ways. There were apparent differences and more subtle similarities in the lives of seemingly diverse individuals; however, ‘looked at in the proper light, their very differences connect[ed] them’ (Geertz, 1968, p. 55).

Methods to engaging in visual ethnographic research

There can be multiple ways of using visual methods as either processes of interpretation or processes of representation (Pink, 2007). For the purpose of this study, visual means, which included photovoice, photo-elicitation, and digital storytelling, were used as both a process of representation and a process of interpretation. In this paper, we discuss the application of these methods as tools for representing the women’s knowledge, as well as understanding their worlds as women, refugees, mothers, workers, and so on.

The visual ethnographic data collection stages were adapted according to the women's willingness to employ one or a combination of the three methods. While not the intent of this research project, there was a progressive and logical transition from one method to another during fieldwork, as each method built on the previous. For example, through photo-elicitation, reflection was based not only on existing photos from 'albums', but of those images captured as part of the photovoice exercise. Additionally, the combined images from photovoice and photo-elicitation were used in the digital stories. While each of these methods can stand alone, the researcher found it valuable to spend time building rapport through photovoice and photo-elicitation before launching into the development of multimedia personal stories.

Photovoice

The photovoice method allows participants to document experiences, strengths, hopes, concerns, and views through photos. It “enables people to define for themselves and others, including policy makers, what is worth remembering and what needs to be changed” (Molloy, 2007, p. 42). The method involves conceptualising problems, goals and objectives, devising topics and guidelines for picture taking, and conducting photovoice training with participants (Goodhart, Hsu, Baek, Coleman, Maresca, & Miller, 2006). Photos are then compiled and used as a focus of discussion to not only allow participants to record and reflect upon the strengths of, and concerns about, their community, but also to promote dialogue and understanding about community issues (Wang & Burris, 1997). Themes and issues are coded, and photographs are presented to an audience - ensuring policy makers are part of the audience - and finally, community members and policy makers mobilise to enact change (Goodhart et al., 2006; Wang & Burris, 1997).

Photovoice is increasingly used to document the experiences of immigrants, refugees, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (for example, Dumbrill, 2009; Haque & Rosas, 2010; Rhodes & Hergenrather, 2007; Schwartz, Sable, Dannerbeck, & Campbell, 2007). This is particularly appropriate because photography balances research and action, focuses on individual and community strengths, promotes community capacity building, and views researchers and participants as co-learners (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). Images are central to data analysis in visual ethnography, making photography a process that invites participants to reflect on their experiences (Ball, 1998; McIntyre, 2003). Yet, Chappell et al. (2011) highlight the limitations of photography in research: an image is in fact “an incomplete picture” (p. 71) because it does not indicate what happens before and after the photograph is taken. Pictures only represent some aspects of the plethora of behaviours, communication forms and social interactions that actually take place. Poses and displays in photographs can indicate a desired behaviour as opposed to depicting reality. Regardless, the benefits of photovoice outweigh its limitations (Harper, 2003).

In this present study, the researcher suggested that each participant could take pictures of meaningful aspects of their lives contributing to their resilience and wellbeing. Some used disposable cameras, which the researcher provided, while others wished to utilise their own digital cameras. Participants were advised to photograph objects, people, or places that had a link to their mental health and wellbeing over several weeks. The researcher stressed that their privacy would be upheld, even when using non-identifiable photographs to strengthen findings where appropriate. The process then moved on to the photo-elicitation stage.

Photo-elicitation

Photo-elicitation involves using photographs to prompt participants to discuss meanings during interviews. The inclusion of photographs affects participants' responses through visual triggers and "evoke[s] deeper elements of human consciousness than do words" (Harper, 2002, p. 13). Different kinds of information can thus emerge through the combined use of oral and visual means (Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, & Phoenix, 2008). Photo-elicitation represents a contemporary approach to qualitative inquiries, although up until ten years ago, it was still kept at the margins of established methodologies (Harper, 2002). This method addresses ongoing issues of representation in ethnography because it shifts the focus from researchers onto participants' perspectives. In 'cultural' studies, photo-elicitation allows for the interpretations of meanings situated in the mundane, and is thus suited for cultural explorations with a strong visual character (Harper, 2002, p. 23), as "[w]hen two or more people discuss the meaning of photographs they try to figure out something together. This is...an ideal model for research". While further research should investigate exactly how interpretations differ in verbal as opposed to visually triggered accounts (Croghan et al., 2008), the value of photo-elicitation should be recognised to its just value.

In this study, single refugee women's photos were not simply 'add-ons' for mere illustrative purposes, but central to data collection and analysis. Participants' thoughts were triggered through photography (McIntyre, 2003) in a manner that invited the women to reminisce reflexively about the context of each picture, thus complementing personal narratives. Photo-elicitation facilitated the expression of abstract concepts that might otherwise be more challenging verbally or in an acquired

language alone. The women's pictures included those taken in 2008 as well as existing 'albums' of photographs, which dated back to several months (in resettlement) or even years (in countries of origin or exile and refugee camps). The older pictures taken pre-migration were highly valued and significantly added to the richness of data shared.

Digital storytelling

Digital storytelling (DST) involves the creation of multimedia personal stories based on 'archived' photos (Meadows, 2003). Participants choose the pictures to be used in a short movie including a recorded voiceover with background music. This method is increasingly used to document lived experience narratives (Lalor, 2009) as well as in health-based research (Gubrium, 2009). The creation of short audiovisual stories using digital media "puts the universal delight in narrative and self-expression into the hands of everyone" (Hartley & McWilliam, 2009, p. 3). Increased access to digital media 'at home' as well as the consumption of media in all forms creates opportunities for stories traditionally excluded from mainstream media to be disseminated. The diversity of contexts in which DST is now practised worldwide represents a 'social movement' (Hartley & McWilliam, 2009). Digital stories' multiple strengths include: authenticity as a documentary, a form of user-led activity, a capacity-building component whereby individuals share narratives using multimedia, and a participatory element eliminating the professional-amateur dichotomy (Hartley & McWilliam, 2009).

Used reflexively, DST is an empowering tool enabling the researcher to "provide politically disempowered people with opportunities to author individual and collective stories that best represent how they experience their lives – individual and collective

stories that carry the signature of the people who live them” (McIntyre, 2003, p. 64).

Rich data that may be overlooked using traditional forms of qualitative methods can thus emerge. DST is described as a ‘non-intrusive’ approach to research that promotes trust, creates a sense of ownership amongst participants, builds participants' skills, and is culturally sensitive (Castleden, Garvin, & Nation, 2008).

The women’s pictures were used to create digital stories on resilience and wellbeing. The three women who agreed to participate in the DST phase had developed a strong and ongoing relationship with the researcher throughout fieldwork. Participants wrote short scripts about their life narratives, including topics previously discussed during fieldwork, such as religion, culture, cooking, community, spirituality, family, children, hope, or grief. These scripts were recorded as ‘voiceovers’. The researcher used the DST software but participants decided on the stories’ structure and content. The women selected their own title for the short movie. They were given the option of having voiceovers recorded in their first language with English sub-titles, or in English, or a combination of several languages.

Together, participants and the researcher selected preferred pictures for the movie. Voiceovers were edited and combined with pictures and online licence-free music. The women had no concerns about having their pictures or names featured in the stories, despite several options to record their stories in a non-identifiable manner. After the researcher completed a first version, participants provided feedback towards the final version. The women wanted their respective stories to be of high quality, represented in a product they were proud of, and consequently, they devoted considerable time and energy towards this outcome. In this way, “engaging in the aesthetic dimension [of the work] enhances... transformative, democratic and

emancipatory objectives” (Clover & Stalker, 2007, p. 2). Much like the experience of Grace and Wells (2007, p. 80), the process engaged the participants in a manner that promoted “expression, reception, engagement, interpretation, and communication”. The short movies were a synthesis of important events in the women’s lives discussed during in-depth interviews, and represented long-lasting mementos for participants to keep post-fieldwork. In line with Gilligan’s (1993) ‘other voice’ feminism, DST was used to give a voice to single refugee women and encourage viewers to listen to their narratives.

Findings

The use of visual ethnographic methods produced a rich, emotional, and enjoyable journey for the researcher and participants. Due to the reflexive nature of the process, the women explained how they unravelled preconceived notions about research to actively and genuinely engage in the process. Visual ethnography clearly contributed to this appreciation and their stories illustrate the strengths of the visual process in making resilience apparent. Participants and the researcher also learned new ways of relating to the qualitative inquiry, in mutually respectful and meaningful ways.

The use of visual methods yielded greater reflexivity and nuanced meanings to the women’s concepts of resilience. While the women might have shared aspects of their stories in various contexts (to community organisations or at university lectures), they had never engaged with visual ethnographic methods before. Consequently, through the creation of digital stories for instance, the women shared significant aspects of their lives previously unexplored. One key example was the case of Mila who barely discussed the meaning of widowhood during in-depth interviews. During the DST process, however, this featured as a prominent chapter of her life story as a key

determinant of her sense of resilience and wellbeing. Similarly, Thara emphasised the centrality of this movie to her relationship with her children, since the latter were unaware of many aspects of her journey depicted in audio-visual form. The DST process triggered a strong attachment to culture, family resilience and storytelling in Thara's life. Participants discovered a new way of rendering their narratives of resilience using visual means.

Overall, four key themes were revealed through the visual ethnographic aspect: (i) a sense of achievement, pride and accomplishment, (ii) a sense of health and wellbeing, (iii) a sense of ownership, and (iv) a sense of burden.

Sense of achievement, pride, and accomplishment

A sense of achievement, pride, and accomplishment was palpable as the women evaluated how far they had come and explored the complex obstacles overcome pre- and post-resettlement through visual ethnographic methods. Older pictures, such as the one displayed in Figure 1, were taken prior to migration to Australia and depicted the women's past experiences including family members, friends, and aspects of their cultural traditions. In Figure 1, Sonia who had experienced domestic violence for several years before divorcing her husband, was proud to show the researcher a picture of the couple surrounded by community members in their homeland during happier times. Having discussed how her husband mistreated her and her children, it was significant for Sonia to share a picture of him; this encouraged her to look back on past circumstances and reflect on how well she was faring presently in Australia.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1: A thirty-year old photo depicting Sonia with her husband whom she later divorced.

Older pictures were precious reminders of a life that seemed light-years away for some, as participants reflected with much ambivalence on how different their circumstances in Brisbane were from what these photographs conveyed. While they missed many aspects of pre-migration contexts, the women emphasised their gratitude for being able to reconstruct a life in Australia. They attached a lot of importance to older pictures, since many refugees do not have the opportunity of gathering such mementos in their flight for asylum.

Pictures taken in 2008, such as Mila's photographs in Figures 2 and 3, depicted activities such as cooking, sewing, or chatting with other women from similar ethnic or language backgrounds, which then triggered stories of friendships, family dynamics and community gatherings. A recurring comment was that in Australia, participants could undertake a diverse range of tasks focussing on their own interests, the welfare of family and friends, and the community's benefit. The women had access to opportunities that ensured they could progress on all levels. Mila's cooking skills, which she acquired from the time she was eight years old, were a significant part of her identity, as cooking was something she was very good at. She was keen to pass on her love of cooking to her three daughters.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Figure 2: Mila enjoying cooking for her children in their Brisbane home.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

Figure 3: Mila sharing food with fellow community members at home.

Discussions around both sets of pictures retracing the women's journeys pre- and post-migration were intense and emotional, and were a testimonial to the strong relationship of trust and the rich information shared. While participants remembered difficult moments, they focussed mainly on their progress from uncertainty to security, and from the unknown to familiarity. The women recognised the arduous journeys leading to their daily routines in Brisbane, even though they could not have imagined such a life would be possible. During discussions using visual methods, the women shared how much they learnt about themselves while having to reflect on the obstacles overcome; this nurtured a strong sense of accomplishment.

The DST element made an even more interesting and valuable contribution. For the women, it was a moment of pride to see their experiences depicted in audiovisual stories, although they did not always understand others' perceptions of their life journeys. For example, Mila emailed the researcher after viewing the final version of her digital recording and said:

The CD is beautiful and everybody who saw it, were surprised asking who did this professional work. My kids and my cousins and my colleagues at work commented that I have gone very far, I don't know in what sense.

There were commonalities across all three digital stories, such as the centrality of faith and belief in God, the importance of ensuring children's education and wellbeing, as well as realising the women's own strengths and potential.

Nevertheless, the stories were distinctive according to language abilities and different life stages and objectives for the future.

Mila and Thara said that showing their short movies to their children was enriching and triggered important family discussions. Thara reported how her children expressed astonishment at their mother's accomplishments, as they had never realised

how much she had sacrificed to ensure her children's future in a stable environment. This realisation prompted the children to ask more questions about their cultural heritage. Thara travelled back to her country of origin during fieldwork and showed her digital story to family members, who were impressed to see the progress in her life, and wanted to record and broadcast similar accounts of their own lives.

Sense of health and wellbeing

Working on digital stories was an appropriate way of tying themes together as the movies complemented rich details shared during in-depth interviews around notions of health and wellbeing. By discussing pictures and creating digital stories, participating women were specific about what contributed to their wellbeing in Australia. One key theme was the ability to provide good education opportunities for their children in a safe and stable environment. The wellbeing of their children was central to digital stories in particular. Such a critical aspect of their lives would have been jeopardised if the single women had not resettled to Australia. The wellbeing of their children was critical to the women's own sense of health. They bore parenting responsibilities with much anxiety, and were acutely aware of community pressures to raise 'good' children. The women were apprehensive of significant challenges ahead concerning their children in terms of changing family dynamics, intergenerational tensions, and maintaining strong cultural ties.

Another important facet explored through visual ethnography was the ability to interact with other people from countries of origin or exile, or from similar language group in Brisbane. While the women recognised the more detrimental aspects of community dynamics (such as expectations to attend meetings and community events, or gossip and ostracism because of their single status), they were adamant that

community involvement was preferable to isolation and particularly critical to maintaining children's cultural ties. The women recognised the contribution of strong community networks to their own health and wellbeing. Participants strongly encouraged their children to attend many community events, such as the one depicted in Figure 4 (taken by the researcher), for continuous engagement and exposure to their cultures of origin.

[Insert Figure 4 here]

Figure 4: Traditional dance performance at a community event in 2008 in Brisbane.

The women's abilities to get through each day and navigate tensions and opportunities afforded by their new circumstances yielded a sense of resilience situated in the mundane. Thus, the women's narratives highlighted the embeddedness of resilience. DST emphasised what motivated them to keep going through major life changes and persevere during arduous times. Positive mental health outcomes were not identified as one-off, extraordinary events, but as everyday achievements demonstrated in their ability to manage daily obstacles and opportunities, such as juggling numerous responsibilities (see Lenette et al., 2012, for full discussion). For Mila, the local community (both pre-and post-migration) hampered her sense of resilience and wellbeing. However, her involvement in DST provided an avenue to reflect on such experiences, and reinforced the resilient outcomes she achieved:

Up to now I still wonder how I survived in a place where there was no safety, where anything could happen to you and your family any time, and you had no option. I still don't know how I am managing a family of five and how I am doing the triple job that is work, study and family.

The women's narratives based on photographs and digital stories offered novel perspectives on resilience and wellbeing and were helpful to understand refugee women's resettlement experiences. Thus, many aspects of the women's lives would remain unexplored without the inclusion of a photovoice, photo-elicitation, and DST.

Sense of ownership

Participants understood the informed consent process required for photographs and digital stories, in line with research requirements. However, while the approach employed was designed to uphold their privacy, the women posed in almost all the pictures they shared and were not the least concerned about being photographed, or having significant others included in pictures. They were keen to share aspects of their lives thus far confined to the private domain. Similarly, they wanted their digital stories to contain identifiable information and declined the option of creating anonymous stories. In fact, the women insisted on having personal details, such as their names and countries of origin, made explicit, indicating that participants had strong ownership of their stories. They wanted the visual elements to match recorded voiceovers as an integral part of digital stories. The women observed that they had never been given the opportunity to reflect, creatively or otherwise, on their achievements. They enjoyed the opportunity to make their stories visually meaningful with the inclusion of their voices in the research process, which proved empowering.

Sense of burden

Interestingly enough, only three of eight women undertook the visual ethnographic project. Those who did not participate reported struggling to find time to take pictures. Some said they forgot to bring their cameras along, remembering to take pictures of important events or people only when it was too late. Another participant

took some pictures but lost the disposable camera. In essence, participants indicated that they felt uncomfortable or ‘burdened’ with taking photographs in addition to other daily responsibilities. The situation might have been different had some of the women been experiencing a more stable stage of resettlement. Consequently, the researcher worked closely with the women to monitor their engagement with visual ethnography and ensured that those who did not wish to take part were not pushed to do so. This was important so that participants were not subjected to burdensome or uncomfortable processes. Thus, while photovoice, photo-elicitation, and DST are useful research methods for some refugee women, it may be inappropriate for others.

Implications for future research

Three key implications contribute to knowledge on qualitative research using visual methodologies. Based on the findings with refugee women, this approach (i) enables a collaborative and authentic sharing of life narratives; (ii) raises questions on the politics of representation and the requirement of participant anonymity; and (iii) has a level of intrusiveness that should be acknowledged.

Firstly, the use of photovoice and photo-elicitation was of most benefit mainly to the researcher by yielding key data about participants’ lived experiences previously unarticulated. Concurrently, the inclusion of DST was most powerful specifically for participants, as the reflexive nature of the process enabled each participant to narrate and reconstruct life stories from pictures, in a way they had not considered before.

These implications indicate that a genuine co-construction of knowledge was made possible through visual ethnography. Such collaborative and authentic sharing of narratives is key to yielding nuanced understandings of refugee lived experiences. As such, the participatory nature of the methods makes them practice interventions in

themselves, meaning that when participants are genuinely engaged in the research process as co-constructors of knowledge, there can be significant benefits and changes to their lives, as depicted in the findings from this study.

Secondly, the use of visual tools in qualitative studies counteracts a number of limitations of traditional ethnographic research linked to the politics of representation. Research involving individuals from refugee backgrounds in resettlement can be complex in terms of language fluency in particular. In this study, the researcher and participants all spoke an acquired language. The nature of information shared verbally thus depended on fluency in English, educational level, and interpersonal communication abilities. The use of an acquired language begs the question as to whether accurate meanings are reflected and interpreted using verbal data collection methods solely. Thus, including visual methods offers an alternative pathway to conveying meanings on sensitive and mostly abstract concepts, and can thus reduce the likelihood of misrepresentation of participants' perspectives. It is the researcher's responsibility to privilege participants' narratives (Denton, 2005).

Furthermore, the sense of ownership, which single refugee women felt in the process of documenting their stories, raises questions about whether de-identification is always best practice when exploring sensitive issues with participants. There is a potential for imposing a deficit-focussed approach in assuming that all participants would wish to remain anonymous. Perry (2011) provides critical insights on ethical requirements in relation to anonymity, based on her experience with a Sudanese young man who refused to participate in ethnographic research because his name would be changed. She contends that such ethical requirements are biased and rooted in positivist and biomedical research paradigms. In this current study, it was clear that

from the women's perspectives, de-identification would have removed an essential element to their stories and could have been disempowering. Since participants from refugee backgrounds are often portrayed from a vulnerable and deficit perspective (Murray, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2010), sharing accomplishments and significant achievements publicly through visual means may be particularly beneficial.

At the same time, the issue of anonymity raised tensions for the researcher. This was not based on the women's inability to understand the requirements of research in an academic context (in fact, they were well aware of the implications, having previously experienced engagement in research in refugee camps), but rather it was based on a concern for the inability of participants to anticipate the ways their stories might be used in the future. While participants signed consent forms, this tension remains central for the authors, who continually re-assess the ethical implications of using participants' data many years post-fieldwork, and in different contexts (such as writing journal articles) than originally discussed with participants. Thus, it is important for researchers using visual ethnography to reconceptualise notions of ethical engagement and be more critical of distinct research contexts.

Thirdly, findings from this study challenge the notion that visual ethnographic methods are non-intrusive in all circumstances (see for instance, Castleden et al.'s (2008) description of DST). It is more likely that there is a certain level of intrusiveness, minimal as it may be. While sensitive or distressing topics can be usefully explored using creative methods that complement the spoken word, the very nature of research involving audiovisual means implies an intrusion albeit respectful and collaborative. Thus, visual ethnography, and DST in particular, does not always succeed in being a non-intrusive approach to data collection, creating tensions to be

carefully negotiated in the researcher-participant relationship. By maintaining a continual dialogue with each participant in terms of levels of intrusiveness and their implications, future research endeavours can remain ethical and respectful, while honouring participants' stories. Hence, participants can only fully benefit from involvement in DST projects when knowledge is co-constructed alongside researchers. This generally outweighs the impact of the research intrusion on participants' lives.

Conclusion

Visual ethnography enriches the quality and depth of data on refugee lived experiences and the complex nature of mental health concepts explored within socio-cultural contexts. The use of an intersectional framework combined with visual ethnographic methods is particularly suited to convey nuanced understandings of participants' social worlds. Further research among refugee women using this theoretical lens would be useful, while there is ample opportunity to conduct further research in the field of refugee mental health using visual ethnographic methods. The dynamic, complex, and multi-faceted nature of refugee journeys provides a solid platform to investigating how individuals adapt to change in diverse contexts and across age, gender, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic circumstances, among many other variables. Visual ethnography offers a broader avenue to engage ethically and reflexively with research participants from refugee backgrounds to yield complex understandings of lived experiences. This approach, when embraced respectfully and sensitively, can convey previously unexplored dimensions of refugee narratives in resettlement contexts, as exemplified by this paper's findings. The value of visual means to explore mental health concepts more broadly cannot be underestimated.

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Table 1: Information on participants.

Participant/ number of interviews	Country of origin	Time in Aust. (yrs.)	Marital status	English language abilities	Educational level/ employment status	Number of children / dependents	Age
#1 (Mila*) 9 interviews	Sudan	5	Widow	Excellent	University / part time work in community development, full time university student	5 children	Late 30s
#2 (Thara*) 7 interviews	Sudan	2	Widow	Excellent	University / full time work in community development	5 children	40s
#3 (Sonia*) 7 interviews	Burundi	2	Divorced	Limited	Vocational / unemployed, unpaid community work	7 children + 3 dependents	Mid- 50s

* Pseudonyms.