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Author

Goopy, Suzanne, Lloyd, David

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Documenting the Human Condition in Everyday Culture

Finding a Partnership between Ethnography and Photo-Documentary

Suzanne Elizabeth Goopy, Griffith University, Australia

David Lloyd, Griffith University, Australia

Abstract: The new ethnographic methodology that acknowledges the subjectivity inherent in humans studying humans and embraces inter-disciplinarity has created exciting possibilities for researchers investigating the human condition as it is manifested in everyday and domestic culture. This paper discusses some of the theoretical and practical issues involved in a particular application of this new ethnography as two researchers from ostensibly different modes of inquiry – ethnography and visual arts – undertook a study into the quality of life of a small group of older Italo-Australians. The paper discusses the methodology used and the experiences that arose from the collaboration between an anthropologist and a photo-documentalist.

Keywords: Ethnography, Photo-Documentary, Collaboration

HOW WE UNDERSTAND, or come to understand, individuals and groups is a complex process. This paper takes its premise from the work of Mary Douglas in an attempt to uncover the subjective aspects of the mundane that represent and give insight into the human condition. The work of Mary Douglas, especially *How institutions think* (1987) highlights the complex interplay between structure and agency. Her theory explains that a certain amount of cultural stability is realised through the interaction between individuals and society. In this sense culture is about both the group structure and the individual's agency. The study described in this paper applies Douglas's insight into how culture is mediated through the mundane by means of an applied anthropology of the quality of life of a specific group of people.

'Quality of life' (QOL) is both a term of specific interest to health researchers and social policy makers as an ageing population becomes a major issue in most western countries, and a term that is so inclusive and potentially elusive that an attempt to delineate its dimensions might seem more the province of philosophy and aesthetics than of the social sciences. Our research project had its origins precisely in this double sense of the term 'quality of life' – its valency as a marker of well-being, and hence as a key commodity in social and health policy debates, and its inextricable entanglement within the rich matrix of lived experience. Our intention was to fashion a research approach that challenged boundaries – between the visual and the verbal, the researcher and the researched, social structure and material agency. At the same time, we chose as the domain of our

study a group whose specific experiences exemplify many of the dimensions of debates about ageing and quality of life in Australia – a group of older Italo-Australians whose presence in the country was a result of the large program of immigration from southern Europe that was systematically encouraged by the national government during the 20 years after 1945.

Background to the Project

This project combines disciplines housed within two ostensibly disparate parts of Griffith University in Brisbane, Queensland – Nursing and Health, and Visual Arts. Ten years after the Queensland College of Art's (QCA) amalgamation with the University, Visual Arts as a discipline still struggles to define its research methodology. This study, by exploring ways in which photography (especially photo-documentary) may be used as a legitimate tool of social inquiry and a transmitter of ethnographic knowledge, links an aspect of visual arts practice to an established research tradition of visual ethnography. Conversely, the central role of photography means that the project acts to transcend traditional models of ethnographic health research and goes some way to countering the view that the visual arts are simply aesthetic, an object of research rather than a legitimate contributor to 'real' research.

This study is interested in uncovering the individual perceptions of QOL among older Italo-Australians. QOL is a subjective measure of a person's total wellbeing. It is a measure that is constructed through the interaction of the person with their social, psychological and physical environments. As a subjective



measure of a person's wellbeing, QOL has no objective reality that stands independent of its creator and therefore does not lend itself to be easily understood through scientific-realist paradigms. By structuring the project around the notions inherent in an ethnographic study, it is possible to explore the procedures used by Italo-Australians in seeing, describing and explaining notions of well-being while at the same time extending the current research methods associated with traditional visual and cultural ethnographic studies (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995). For the purpose of this project, ethnography is defined as 'a process of creating and representing knowledge (about society, culture and individuals) that is based on the ethnographers' own experiences' (Pink 2001: 18). By involving the participants themselves in gathering the data alongside the researchers, we argue that we are able, as Pink (2001: 18) puts it, to 'offer versions of the researchers' experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and inter-subjectivities through which the knowledge was produced'.

The study has three stages. In stages one and two each participant was handed a disposable camera and asked to photograph significant and positive aspects of their everyday life and/or environment. Once the film was processed, we, the researchers, conducted informal interviews with each person. The images made by each person acted as a catalyst for the discussion, helping participants to identify items, places, people and activities, and the reason for their choice of subject matter and the narratives arising from the discussion in turn assisted in prompting the participants to extend their next round of photographs. Used in this way the visual diaries provided an inside viewpoint crucial to the understanding of those items and activities that are significant to the participants' sense of well-being. Photographs are acknowledged in the area of visual ethnography as useful tools in eliciting more precise information at interview (van Leeuwen & Jewitt 2001). Where the approach used in this study differs from that conventionally associated with visual ethnography is that participants were asked to choose their own subject matter, in this way creating fresh imagery directly related to their own, subjective, sense of well-being. The visual diaries in turn enriched the interviews through the vivid memories, feelings, insights, thoughts and memories that the images prompted. Through this process the research was able to assist the participant in giving birth to stories that offer insight (Goopy & Lloyd 2005; van Leeuwen & Jewitt 2001) into the well-being, health and QOL of both the individual and the group.

Following completion of the visual diary and associated interviews, the researchers worked with each participant to construct photographic images –

of the participant, and people and things that the participant identified as significant such as their homes, memorabilia, and family members – in their home. These images form the basis for 'visual maps', which are developed collaboratively with the participants. The 'maps' borrow from the traditions of environmental portraiture. Along with the physical characteristics of the subjects (including dress, body language and facial expression) this final part of the project captures how each participant organizes their space as indicative of the subjective sense of quality of life.

Central to this project is the recognition that any ethnography is a combination of meanings attributed to the phenomena under study by all involved in the study, participants as well as researchers. The project is also built on the premise that words are not the only medium through which knowledge can be transmitted. Crucial to the dissemination of the knowledge drawn from this study will be the use of gallery-type exhibitions as well as journal articles and other print publications. The exhibitions will include the visual maps, diaries and edited transcripts (aural and written), allowing the viewer to empathize with the experience captured in the study. By combining imagery and text, the material will present, as precisely and honestly as possible, the subjective reality of this group's sense of well-being and QOL alongside the context, negotiation and inter-subjectivities through which the presented knowledge was produced (Pink 2001). An additional outcome from disseminating information in this manner is the hope that it will appear 'user friendly' and be available to a broader audience. Arguably, the richness of this ethnography is that the knowledge presented will be accessible to the 'common person', as well as the philosopher/academic.

Researching and Representing 'Quality of Life'

To study quality of life is to study the subjective experience of well-being and destiny. How to capture, understand and make sense of this subjective experience, this quality of life, was the starting point for this project. With a view to 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) our project has addressed the challenge presented by Noble by actively seeking to 'address the ways in which this thickness is embodied in and between subjects and their objects and practices, situated in spaces and maintained *over time*' (2004: 234 original emphasis). In looking to document quality of life, with its many psychological and sociological interpretations (Birren, Lubben & Rowe 1991; Whitehouse & Rabins 1995), we were forced to enter a range of spaces and attend to a variety of experiences and relationships. Our focus is drawn,

ever acutely, to the doggedness and the connectedness of human subjectivity where objects, both words and stories and artefacts and activities, are deeply entwined to offer deep insight into the experience of quality of life.

The meaning of everyday objects is a significant area of contemporary research. It is well recognised that we use goods to fulfil symbolic as well as utilitarian needs – to communicate meaning and construct a sense of self (Douglas & Isherwood 1980). In this way objects, things, possessions, take the form of an investment of self. Objects are not simply individuated meanings, but fulfil complex social tasks that mark social relations and categories and help to reproduce social order (Douglas & Isherwood 1980; Bourdieu 1984; Goopy 2000; 2005; 2006). With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that our bringing together of ethnography and photo-documentary in an attempt to record an anthropology of quality of life, meant that material culture, at both its most mundane and most complex, became the central meeting point for the two disciplines and the development of a hybrid methodology.

Embodying the Visual

Anthropology has begun to extend its understanding of the visual from a mere data-gathering tool to recognise the transformative power of the visual as a way of generating as well as recording knowledge. By combining imagery and text, the presentation of the understanding and knowledge gained is able to extend Pink's (2001) understanding of the production of knowledge in a way that, as precisely and honestly as possible, reveals the subjective reality of this group's sense of well-being and quality of life alongside the context, negotiation and inter-subjectivities through which the knowledge and our understating of it is produced.

Within qualitative research the visual has found ready acceptance as a data collection tool but has been viewed with scepticism as to its ability to create and represent (ethnographic) knowledge. In the 1990s post-modern theorists challenged many of the research orthodoxies and a new ethnography emerged endorsing the experience of the researcher and their subjects and contesting the dominance held by the scientific-realist school. Ethnographic knowledge became the informed response of the researcher to the phenomena under scrutiny. Ethically, the researcher was bound to be as honest as possible in interpreting their response to their experience and so mirror the complexities of their interaction with their subjects. As acknowledging and conveying the experience of the researcher was pivotal to this new ethnography, theorists looked for communicative media that could interrogate and convey experiential

knowledge. Photography, video and electronic media became increasingly incorporated into this discipline.

The particular dimension that photo-documentary brings to the visual, however, raises a number of issues. The outrage that surrounds Robert Capa's (1996) image 'Falling Soldier' serves to highlight the relationship between photo-documentary and knowledge. Capa's image of a militiaman collapsing into death is often hailed as the greatest war photograph. But was it staged or are we given an insight into that moment of death? If un-staged, Capa's image places the viewer at that precise moment and propels the imagination, helping us to complete our understanding of things about which we wish to know. If it were staged, it presents to the viewer a metaphor created by Capa to voice his opinion of war. While the latter may be meritorious, it cannot excite the viewer in the same manner as the former.

Photo-documentary practice, of which Capa could be considered an early exponent, seeks to identify, capture and interpret the human experience. But what separates photo-documentary from other photographic practices is that the documentist seeks to capture and interpret only those phenomena that exist irrespective of the presence of the camera and that the documentist seeks to be an eye-witness to, or participant in, those phenomena.

By the late twentieth century the challenges posed by post-modernism began to significantly alter the practices of the documentist and the social researcher. The hegemonic sway of the sciences and the authoritarian tone of the researcher's voice were questioned. Research, outside of the natural sciences, became understood as a subjective experience between the researcher and the researched. Communicative forms were interrogated and acknowledged as conveyors of ideological and power structures. And the subjectivities of the human condition, complex and multidimensional, became the focus of our curiosity. Yet as the earlier documentists understood, such subjectivities could not be easily captured through the written word alone. While artists had long questioned traditional models of knowing, new models are emerging within the traditional sober sciences that present knowing as 'both a cognitive and affective response to phenomenon' (Sullivan 2005:121).

The changing paradigms have paved the way for the visual to be increasingly acceptable in researching the human condition for, as Pink (2004) argues it is no more subjective or objective than written text. Today the methodologies of the contemporary researcher and the photo documentist run parallel. No longer seeking to be only objective, both embrace the first-person narrative which is informing, challenging and passionate. However, the researcher does

so textually, while the documentalist achieves this through the culture of aesthetics.

Picturing Italo-Australian 'Quality of Life'

In an attempt to redress what Marcus (1994) identifies as the habit of anthropology to expunge the spatial from culture, the bringing together of ethnography and photo-documentary has meant that it is possible to capture and explore the spatial form in which the participants live their lives. Bringing the two disciplines together has given us the ability to depict what quality of life is and what it means as represented and demonstrated through the cultural performances and occasions experienced and presented by the participants. Combining the techniques of photo-documentary with ethnography offers a means, as Bauman argues, to 'discover the patterns, functions and meanings of those communicative resources in the conduct and interpretation of social life for the people among whom they are current' (1992: xv). The procedure illustrates Denzin's argument about the ability of photography to 'encapsulate contingent events that are embedded in the flow of everyday life' (2003: 8). It also allows the narratives of the participants to maintain their locality and spatiality as they are supported by and act to support the material culture that surrounds them, and which is the composite of the photo-documentation of quality of life.

The combining of the two disciplines has meant that the outcomes of our research are able to contain within them attempts to represent the visual, the cultural, the performative and the spatial – within the one combined photographic and narrative frame. For the participants they capture their identity, their quality of life, and their experiences of being. The composite images – both visual and textual, which are the outcome of this work both together and independently to produce and reproduce the space of the participants' known objective and subjective environment as a narrative of identity and quality of life.

A result of our collaboration has been the realisation of a narrative which centres on the complexity of the participants' hybrid identity - neither that of an Italian, nor that of an Australian, rooted in one place but carving out, imagining and creating another identity a long way from 'home'. It became impossible for us to separate quality of life from identity. The space represented in the snapshots, the narratives and the final visual and textual compositions is indicative of Massey's notion of space as 'constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations' (1991: 239). In bringing the strengths of ethnography and photo-documentary together, it has been possible to capture what Shields (1997) defines as 'social spatialization', that is the process by which

space is considered an artefact of the social imagination. In this way it is their imagination as it plays out in the participants' daily lives and memories that forms their hybrid identity and structures meaning for their quality of life. Their narratives, prompted by photographs, are never straightforward; rather they are woven with tales of relationships and achievements. The interconnectedness, not only of individuals with their immediate family but through relationships formed with other Italians (with a shared history) and Anglo-Australians, creates a new type of genealogy for identity and acts as a metaphor for continuity.

The portrait process focuses on a joint decision by researchers and participants to identify aspects of their domestic environment to be captured in a single composite photographic image that reflects their overall sense of identity and quality of life. This process emphasises in particular the domestic surroundings and gives participants the opportunity to select and emphasise aspects of their domestic environment as part of constructing a coherent composite image. While Emmison & Smith (2000), drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1990) and Halle (1993), show how the interior of the home may be read as a cultural text, where readings of home decoration and objects decode the social norms and values of the occupants, our work follows more closely, and expands on, the ethnographic work of Clarke (2001), Miller (2001) and Pink (2004). These authors all argue that home decoration cannot be simply read as text. As Pink argues, 'the visible and aesthetic qualities of home decoration (and housework) are the results of the complex relationships between the different identities, agencies, resources and relationships in the home' (2004: 64).

Practical Outcomes and Implications of Collaboration

The visual maps can be read alone as photo-documentary records of the participants' subjective and objective experiences or overlaid with their oral stories to extend knowledge. The findings and knowledge produced are presented in four ways: the participants' auto-ethnography brought about by their snapshots, their stories and words captured in interviews, the portraits and mapping of the homes as photo-documents, and overlaying elements of all of these to create a deep way of knowing these individuals and this group. It is possible to simply look at the images and experience a pre-cognitive response, or to respond to the stories of the participants, or finally and most deeply to combine the stories and the images to build a deep understanding at both the cognitive and the aesthetic level of the inter-subjectivities of the participants as their stories are interwoven,

displayed, stored and framed in their homes (both in public and private spaces).

Our visual mapping uncovers the complexity of identity: how public and private spaces are used, what they are set aside for, the boundaries created by their decoration and use, and the ways in which certain objects are displayed in public or private. The visual and performative space of the homes – the arrangement of rooms, the use of decoration, the division between informal and the formal areas, the type and arrangement of furniture in all areas from the bedroom to the formal lounge – are all important to the construction of an Italo-Australian identity. As Clarke states, ‘past and future trajectories...are negotiated through fantasy and action, projection and interiorisation’ (2001:25). The visual map, taken in this way, is shown to reveal cultural systems and rules of classification that offer both an aesthetic and a hybrid-identity construction of home which combines multi-locality and rooted-ness.

The image and the text capture the individual, collective and collaborative activities that produce space and its embodiment. It is the coming together of experiences, thoughts, feelings, relationships, achievements and identity that contributes to the spatialisation of each participant’s environment. The participants own snapshots and their stories also work together to represent a spatial discourse of place and self. These subjective and sometimes symbolic images of the visual and the textual, which are the culmination of the collaboration, exemplify the process described by Martin in which identity ‘is formed and continually reinforced via individual practice within culturally defined spaces, which are themselves continually constituted out of these same practices’ (1997:92). Objects of primarily individual significance are highlighted in a way that displays intimately how individuals construct their identity and how they understand and express their subjective experience of quality of life.

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About the Authors

Dr Suzanne Elizabeth Goopy

Suzanne Goopy is a lecturer at the School of Nursing and Midwifery and an active researcher within The Centre for Public Culture and Ideas, Griffith University. Suzanne's research interests include: cultural and visual anthropology; secular ritual, the body, health and culture; knowledge and the human condition; cognitive and affective ways of knowing; and building healthy communities. She is currently working with a photo-documentalist on a funded project that examines quality of life notions among older Italian-Australians.

David Lloyd

I am a lecturer with the Department of Photography at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, specialising in the fields of photojournalism and social documentary. My recent projects borrow heavily from the practices inherent in visual ethnography and include hospice and palliative care (*Lloyd, Passing Time, 2000*), documenting a small regional community outside of Brisbane (*Something about Us, Logan Art Gallery, 2001*) and, currently, working on a project looking into substance misuse in the Mt Isa district. Prior to this, I worked in conflict zones documenting crisis areas such as Somalia, Bosnia and Malawi. Specifically, I investigated the rituals involved in normalising the lives of those people involved in ongoing conflict. Working collaboratively with my partner Angela Blakely, we were commissioned by the History Section of the Australian Army to investigate and document Australia's involvement in the Rwanda crisis (*Fry, Gavin Rwanda: The Australian Contingent (1994-95)*) and the World Health Organisation (Euro office) to document health care issues in the former USSR (*Images that Speak, Denmark, 1996*).